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## JUSTIFYING FACTORS OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS' RATIONALITY

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**Abstract:** There are different factors that can justify the rationality of religious beliefs. Some factors have epistemological virtues, and some have functional ones. Based on the inductive method, it is possible to use some justifying factors such as relying on logical demonstration, universality, and comprehensiveness; having more compatibility with people's innate and common sense; more stability and less changeability; independence of religious texts' authority; having more consensus among religious believers; simplicity and explainability; reducing errors in understanding them; dependency of religious texts on them; the basis for religious unity and plurality; independence of believers' presuppositions; and having more practical and useful conclusions. Assessing religions based on the mentioned factors teaches us to focus on logical, universal, innate, coherent, and practical ones as the main characteristics of religious rationality. Applying these justifying factors also helps us to measure the rationality of religious beliefs at their three levels: fundamental, middle, and marginal. Considering the justifying factors pertaining to these three levels of religious belief, they show gradual and hierarchical relationships between them, with the fundamental beliefs having the highest level of rationality, the marginal beliefs having the lowest, and the middle ones having a level in between. The result is that, for establishing peaceful life and interfaith dialogue, we should focus on fundamental beliefs and have a reciprocal understanding of the middle ones.

**Key words:** Religion, Levels of Religious Belief, Rationality, Justifying Factors, Fundamental Beliefs.

## 1. Introduction

Rational factors concerning the rationality of religious beliefs are of most concern to theologians and philosophers of religion, although their approach to this subject matter differs. The importance of such factors lies in the possibility of logically justifying and convincingly demonstrating to thinkers and people the rationality of their religious traditions and the extension of rational thinking about the system of religious beliefs. It is a fact that there is no consensus among philosophers of religion as to how to find factors related to justifying religious beliefs. Some, such as Fideists, believe that rationally justifying religious beliefs is unnecessary and impossible. Some philosophers, like extreme rationalists, emphasize the necessity of justifying rational beliefs only based on principles of modern reason and rationality. However, some critical and moderate rationalists accept the possibility of rational factors regarding justifying religious beliefs, arguing that it is impossible to evaluate all of them, and do not deny the existence of some meta-rational or beyond-the-reasoning of religious beliefs. Some perspectives emphasize pragmatism and the rational coherence of religious beliefs. Pragmatists maintain that whatever belief has more useful results is more rational. Coherentists assert that internal, as well as external, compatibility and coherence among religious beliefs' systems are justifiable factors of their rationality.

In this paper, while paying attention to both the positive and negative aspects of the mentioned viewpoints, we have attempted to justify the rational factors of religious belief systems and their rationality within a religious tradition or traditions, preferably divine and theistic ones. We have considered the collection of justifying factors, evidences, and observations together and viewed them all or most of them as the angles of a prism. The logical conclusion of such an approach is to roughly form a comprehensive and gradual, hierarchical attitude to religious belief systems, in which the rationality of each belief is determined based on the evidence and reasons that acknowledge its truth and justify its functions. Regarding this web of religious beliefs, it is possible to consider internal and external longitudinal relations between them, in which some beliefs support others ontologically and epistemologically, and vice versa. Now, our main question is: How can we, in general, justify and demonstrate the rationality of our religious belief system? In this approach, what reasons and factors do we have for evaluating the rationality of the religious belief system? Finally, what levels and stages of religious beliefs can be considered, such that all of them necessarily have the same rationality, but they have different longitudinal and gradual rationalities based on their ontological place and functional roles? In order to answer such questions, this paper attempted to test the hypothesis that our approach

recognizes the rationality of religious beliefs better than other approaches by combining plural and related gradual rationalities of religious belief systems. Our method and approach also emphasize that not all religious beliefs are at the same level of rationality, but rather the system of religious beliefs constitutes a group of different beliefs which have latitudinal and longitudinal relations in which the measure of the rationality of each belief depends on factors such as its ontological place, the possibility of its logical justification, its stability and universality, and its relations to other beliefs. In order to test the measure of rationality of religious beliefs, we first introduce some plural and related justifying factors inductively, and then try to show how these factors can be used to judge the rationality of religious beliefs. We will also discuss our approach to determining the rationality of religious beliefs when all or most of these factors are combined and considered as a whole. It is important to note that our understanding of rationality in this paper includes its most diverse kinds, such as theoretical, practical, instrumental, deontological, and means-end, but the measure of participation of these rationalities varies. (Stenmark 1995, 20–27).

## 2. Justifying Factors of Religious Beliefs' Rationality

In this research, by studying the plural justifying factors that some thinkers and philosophers have generally introduced for evaluating the rationality of religious beliefs, we take into account all of those factors inductively in order to provide the possibility to generally judge the rationality of religious beliefs. Thus, although we try to review each of the factors, we are ultimately going to get a universal rationality by considering the whole web of religious beliefs. In this case, it is possible to consider the following factors regarding the rationality of religious beliefs: 1. relying on logical demonstration, 2. Universality, 3. Having more compatibility with people's innate and common sense, 4. Increased stability and decreased changeability, 5. Independency of religious texts' authority 6. Having more consensus among religious believers, 7. Simplicity and the possibility to more explaining, 8. Reducing errors in understanding them, 9. Religious texts' reliance on them, 10. The basis for religious unity and plurality, 11. Independency of believers' presuppositions, 12. Internal coherency and compatibility. 13. Having more practical and useful conclusions.

As it has been seen, thirteen factors have been introduced concerning justifying the rationality of religious belief systems. If each one of them is individually considered for evaluating the rationality of them, it can show the rationality of them from one aspect, but applying all or most of these factors helps us to have a comprehensive approach for justifying their rationality. In the meantime, as our factors are gained inductively, it is possible to add new ones.

## 2.1. Dependency on Logical Demonstration

One of the most significant criteria for assessing the rationality of religious beliefs is evaluating them based on logical argumentation. Here, by argument, I mean a very argumentative syllogism (see Hick 1990, 109-115). Therefore, whatever religious belief which can be easily demonstrated based on logical syllogism has more logical rationality, and conversely, whatever religious belief which is difficult to logically argue or mostly impossible to do so has greatly reduced logical rationality. Here, we take into account three different examples of beliefs: 1. God exists; 2. Jesus Christ is the son of God and has divinity; 3. The church and mosque, according to believers' creeds, are seen as sacred places. Considering these three religious beliefs, for example, shows that the measure of their acceptability of logical arguments is different. All of them are religious beliefs, meaning they are the same in terms of religious beliefs, but they are different and not the same based on our criterion of assessing them through the acceptability of logical arguments. In these examples, the existence of God is easily demonstrable through logical arguments, so we have seen many philosophical, logical, and rational arguments, such as cosmological ones, concerning the existence of God in the history of Islamic and Christian philosophy and theology. (Stumpf 1989, 865; Leibniz 1934, 127). There are also some theistic philosophers who believe that the existence of God is self-evident and needs no arguments. However, second and third beliefs are not easily demonstrable by logical and rational arguments; to gain their rationality and credibility, one needs to refer to the authority of religious texts, religious experience, mystical intuition, religious saints, and leaders. The difficulty of logically and rationally demonstrating second and third beliefs does not mean they are irrational, but rather that the possibility of their logical demonstration is less. Therefore, in order to gain their rationality, we should refer to other criteria such as the authority of religious texts, imitation, or religious experience.

## 2.2. Universality and Being Global

The second criterion for assessing the rationality of religious beliefs is to evaluate their universality and global reach, as well as their local marginality. Here, our argument is that the more universal a belief is, and the more believers and followers it has among human beings, the more rational it is. Conversely, the less universal a belief is, and the fewer believers and followers it has, the less rational it is. Understanding this matter is clearer when paying attention to these examples: 1. God exists, 2. the afterlife exists, 3. Prophet Muhammad is the Prophet of Islam, or Jesus is the Son of God, 4. Ali Ibn Abi Taleb is the first Imam of Shia Islam, or the Catholic Church, is the only way of salvation. 5. Imam Mahdi is the last

Imam and savior of Shia Muslims, or the Pope is an infallible leader of Christians. 6. The shrine/church in our city heals people. Comparing such beliefs, for example, shows the importance of the criterion of universality and comprehensiveness, as opposed to locality and partiality. You see, the first and second beliefs are universal and global, so that not only believers of divine religions, but also some believers of non-divine religions maintain them (Peterson 1991, 28). Such beliefs have not been abandoned even after many centuries. The third belief belongs only to Muslims or Christians, the fourth belief only to Shia or Catholics, the fifth belief to a group of Shia or Catholics alone, and the sixth belief to the people who live in that city. Based on the criterion of universality, the collection of religious beliefs builds a longitudinal chain that starts from the most universal and global beliefs and ends with the more local and partial ones, thus reducing their rationality from universality to locality.

### **2.3. The Compatibility with People's Innate and Common Sense**

The third criterion of virtue is the measure of religious compatibility with people's innate and common sense. Whatever religious belief is more compatible with people's innate and common sense, and has a better and more exact relation to their understanding, then such a belief has more commonality among them and attracts more acceptance. In this case, we can see such beliefs at work: 1. God exists; 2. Idols are gods; 3. God is an almighty, omniscient, and omnipotent being; 4. Jesus Christ is God's son and God incarnate; 5. Jesus Christ was sacrificed for our sins; 6. God sees our intentions and deeds. As seen here, the first belief is more compatible with most people in the world. The second belief is acceptable and justifiable only for pagans and has no compatibility with those who seek absolute reality. The third belief is naturally accepted only by theists. The fourth and fifth beliefs have no compatibility with human beings' naturally innate capacities, and only some Christians maintain them. The sixth belief is more compatible with our natural innate and common sense (Pannenberg 1991, Vol. 1: pp 370, 384, 432, 442, Vol. 3: 527-532). In this research, by supposing that human beings naturally seek absolute reality and accept those religious beliefs that have more compatibility with their striving for seeking absolute perfection, morality, and reality, we can measure the rationality of religious beliefs. So, those beliefs that directly answer human beings' innate needs, such as believing in the existence of a merciful, creator, omniscient, omnipotent, and observer God, have more acceptance and are more rational. Religious beliefs that are more moral, such as God being merciful and loving towards his servants, and being just and never oppressive, have more acceptance. On the other hand, those religious beliefs that are less compatible with our natural innate, but are inferred from religious authority and texts, have less rationality.

## 2.4. More Stability and Less Variability

Studying the measure of religious beliefs' stability and changeability over past centuries is one of the most important criteria for assessing their rationality. Here, each belief that, within a religious tradition, has more stability and less changeability has more rationality, and, conversely, continual alteration of a religious belief indicates a decrease in its rationality. In this case, we can see the following beliefs: 1. God exists; 2. Life after death exists; 3. Jesus Christ is the son of God and his incarnation occurred in the world; 4. Salvation is only possible in the Church through Jesus Christ; 5. Salvation is only possible by accepting Shia Islam's teachings; 6. Disbelievers and people of the Book (Jews and Christians) are not purified; 7. Mourning for a holy martyred saint (such as Imam Hossein in Shia Muslim) leads to forgiveness of sins. In these samples, the first and second beliefs have not changed much over the centuries within religious traditions. The third and fourth beliefs have been both challenged and accepted, particularly by the reformist movement up to the present day. Some Enlightenment philosophers rejected such beliefs, while others, including some Catholics, accepted and affirmed them (McGrath 2011, 41–53). The fifth and sixth beliefs have undergone many changes, from exclusivist to pluralistic approaches, in modern Shia Islam. It is now evident that the collection of religious beliefs is influenced by two epistemic and non-epistemic factors; epistemic factors such as reason, intuition, experience, scientific developments, and the introduction of new epistemic theories; and non-epistemic factors such as political, social, cultural, economic, and other changes and developments. For example, philosophical thought of the modern world, whether or not it has affected believers' rereading of religious beliefs, political developments such as the establishment of national states based on democracy, globalization, and the digital world, have all had an effect on human beings' attitudes towards their religious beliefs. It seems that the most significant epistemic influence of the contemporary world on human beings is the idea of humanism and subjectivism against theistic attitude, which has led to religious pluralism in its different aspects. Considering the history of religious beliefs developments, it appears that whatever belief that has been less influenced by epistemic and non-epistemic factors, such as believing in Almighty God, has tolerated fewer alterations. However, some beliefs that do not have more logical foundations have accepted more changes under such developments, since epistemic and non-epistemic developments and increasing human knowledge have shown the minimum rationality or logicity of such beliefs. So, for example, third and sixth beliefs have a lower degree of rationality because they are undergoing reformism based on current developments, or some pathologist thinkers have attempted to reform them. In short, a belief's logicity is directly related to its historical

stability, and accepting more changes to a belief is directly related to the logical weakness in its foundations. Therefore, throughout the history of religions, beliefs with greater stability indicate greater rationality, while beliefs with greater change indicate less rationality. Here, by considering some religions, like Buddhism and Hinduism, which worship some kinds of idols, it is questioned how the historical continuation of idolatry indicates the rationality of their religious beliefs. In responding to such a question, first it should be emphasized that the focus of this research is on divine religions like Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, so if there are some counter facts in some non-divine religions, it does not reject our claim. In the meantime, some thinkers and Indian philosophers believe that the roots of Buddhism and Hinduism were a kind of monotheism, and that, in the process of their historical alterations, earthly manifestations of one God, such as Brahma or Nirvana, have appeared in the form of plural gods (see Woodhead 2002, 21-23). Thus, if such religions have divine roots, this fact confirms our claim in this research; that is, the origin of religious belief in Buddhism and Hinduism is referred to an absolute reality that is continually stable and unchangeable, which shows its rationality. Their secondary branches have been formed based on people's presuppositions and under the influence of epistemic and non-epistemic conditions, and since they have required rationality, they have been subjected to many alterations during the history of Indian religions.

### **2.5. Independency of Religious Texts' Authority**

The independence of religious texts' authority is one of the most significant criteria of religious beliefs' rationality. It is necessary to note that whatever belief can be demonstrated without referring to religious texts' authority has more epistemic credibility and rationality (see: Javadi Amoli 2008, 31, 131, 136). Of course, after accepting some rational beliefs, we are naturally confronted with some other beliefs whose credibility originates from religious texts' authority. Thus, it is better to divide rationality into two kinds, including within a religious tradition and outside of it. Those beliefs that are demonstrated through rational arguments, or in some cases, through religious experience or intuition and are independent of a religious text's authority, have more rationality than beliefs that are dependent on the authority of religious tradition. Meanwhile, in this case, the authority of religious texts should be demonstrated through rational and logical arguments. Related to this criterion, we can see the following examples: 1. God exists. 2. God is an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-benevolent being. 3. The appearance of the final savior is to establish the real justice. 4. The Bible is inspired by divine inspiration for its authors. 5. The Qur'an is the direct revelation to the Prophet of Islam. 6. It is necessary to obey the divine prophets and saints. 7. Ali Ibn Abi Taleb is the first Imam of Shia Muslims, or the Pop is the

infallible leader. 8. According to Shia Muslims, Imams have the position of spiritual healing, or the Catholic Church is the only path of salvation. Considering and comparing of these beliefs, for example, demonstrates the importance of authority within and outside of religious traditions. Here, the first and second beliefs are demonstrated through rational arguments without any reference to the authority of religious texts or traditions. The third belief can roughly be proved rationally since human beings' historical experiences of oppression and their natural expectations of establishing justice and happiness, indicate the logicity of returning the final savior without any reference to religious texts' authority, although religions' teachings and people's understanding are not necessarily the same. The importance of such beliefs is that, in addition to reason, some religious texts, like the Bible and the Quran, confirm them. The fourth and fifth beliefs are credible only for believers of that religion, not most people. These beliefs can be roughly proved through rational arguments within a religious tradition or through the authority of religious texts. As a result, such beliefs have rational, intuitive, or transmitted credibility, although in some cases their rational credibility can exist independently of religious text authority but within a religious tradition rather than outside of it. Therefore, we have two kinds of rational, and sometimes intuitive, beliefs independent of religious texts. The first is beliefs that are absolutely independent of any religious tradition, such as believing in the existence of God. The second is beliefs that can only be demonstrated through rational argument without referring to religious texts' authority, such as being inspired by the Bible or being revealed by the Quran. The sixth, seventh, and eighth beliefs are demonstrable only through the authority of religious texts; that is, first their credibility must be proved rationally, and then the credibility of the mentioned beliefs can be referred to them. In this case, it is said that the credibility and rationality of such beliefs are within a religious tradition and depend on the authority of religious texts. It is necessary to note that most of the believers' deeds and creeds in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, such as prayer, fasting, baptism, rituals, blessings, mourning, pilgrimages, the existence of angels, the virtues of paradise and hell, the situation of good and bad people on the Day of Judgment, and so on, are derived from such authority and rationality. That is, they have no credibility without the credibility of the Bible or the Quran, while the credibility of these divine books is demonstrated through rational, intuitive, or other means.

## 2.6. Internal Coherency and Compatibility

Internal coherence and compatibility are two of the most important factors in determining the rationality of religious beliefs. Coherence and compatibility imply that there should not be any contradictory beliefs within the web of religious beliefs, but that they should be compatible



with and confirm each other (Audi 1998, 206-208). Therefore, if there are some incompatible beliefs, it reduces their rationality. For example, in Christian theology, some beliefs do not have adequate coherence and compatibility with each other: 1. God is an absolute and almighty existence other than human beings. 2. Jesus Christ is a creature and other than God. 3. God incarnated in the body of Jesus Christ. 4. Jesus Christ has both human and divine attributes. 5. Jesus Christ, due to his divine attributes, is the son of God and a kind of divinity. In these Christian beliefs, it is accepted that God is a transcendent being other than a human being, and also that Jesus Christ as a human being has attained a divine position. According to the teachings of the Trinity and Incarnation, it is explained that He sacrificed Himself for humankind's sins (Pannenberg 1991, Vol. 1: 347-355). When these beliefs are considered collectively and in relation to one another, their internal contradiction and incompatibility indicate a reduction in the degree of their rationality. It is also possible to find such beliefs among Shia Muslims. For example, consider the following beliefs: 1. God is omniscient and, according to His justice, He does not oppress anyone. 2. God will inquire about all of our deeds, even as much as atoms, on the day of judgment (Quran 4:40; 16:90; 10:44). 3. Our sins are forgiven through the pilgrimage of Shia Imams' holy shrines. 4. All of our sins are forgiven through mourning for our martyred Imam Hossein. Here, the emphasis of most Shia Muslims, though not all of them, on forgiveness of all sins through mourning or pilgrimage is contrary to divine justice and wisdom. Therefore, if someone believes in all such teachings equally, their religion's belief system has some contradictions and is subject to reducing the measure of rationality. There are such beliefs in Muatazellit theological Islam regarding the role of God in human beings' free deeds, while Muatazellit theologians maintain the absolute will, power, and knowledge of God. It is possible to indicate a denial of human free will in Asharite theological Islam, in which all human deeds are ascribed to God and such ascriptions are clearly contrary to the Quranic verses and human beings' objective experiences and the system of divine rewards and punishments (Nasr & Leaman 1996, Vol.1, 214-216). In fact, the significance of the coherency criterion is that we do not judge the rationality of beliefs beforehand, but by taking them into the web of beliefs and assessing their reciprocal relations, the degree of their rationality is clarified. Since they either support and justify or violate each other logically or ontologically in the religious belief system, when we see religious beliefs in an integrated web, their logical coherency or contradictions are better clarified, which shows their rationality.

### **2.7. Beliefs Simplicity and having more Explaining**

Two of the most important criteria for a religious belief system's rationality are simplicity and the potential for explanation. Here,

simplicity is meant to make a belief easy to understand and to ensure people accept it. Some contemporary philosophers, such as Swinburne, speak of simple explanations in this case and claim that divine explanations are among the simplest explanations and have their own rationality (Swinburne, 2004, 245). To understand the importance of this fact, we can cite some cases of religious beliefs from different traditions: 1. According to the creeds of divine believers, there is an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-benevolent God. 2. According to Hindu believers, there is an impersonal and undetermined God that is called Brahman or Nirvana. 3. According to Process theology, God is a part of the world, not separated from it. Meanwhile, God is not perfect and absolute in his divine attributes. 4. According to materialism, the foundation of the whole system of being is matter. 5. According to humanism and anthropocentrism, human beings are the end of the whole system of being, and there is no existence except for them. Adherents of these beliefs have given some arguments for demonstrating their claims here. But whatever is simpler is more significant. It seems that regarding the mentioned beliefs, divine explanations that were cited in the first belief, have more simplicity and require rationality. Swinburne, for example, rereading philosophers' traditional arguments concerning the existence of God, concludes that their basic virtue is divine oneness, pays more attention to principles like simplicity and temporal orderliness, and argues that these principles provide the best hypothesis for explaining the simplicity and rationality of human beings' experiences. So he disagrees with both materialistic explanations in which human beings are reduced to the level of material things and theistic systems that have not paid necessary attention to human beings' reason. He prefers to pay attention to the religion of divine monotheism, whose God is worshiped by divine religions like Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The simplicity of such an explanation is formed, for him, as follows: there is at least one divine person who essentially is omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, and absolutely free. Swinburne refers to such an existence as the God of divine religions, and such a claim is known as theism, which is held by Muslims, Christians, and Jews (Swinburne 1993, 1-2).

## 2.8. Believers' Consensus

One of the more important cases of the rationality of religious beliefs is the consensus of all or more theistic believers in the first stage; the consensus of all divine believers in the second stage; the consensus of believers of a divine religion in the third stage; the consensus of believers of a religious sect in the fourth stage; the consensus of one branch of a religious sect in the fifth stage; and finally, the consensus of one branch of a religious sect in one geographical place in the sixth stage. Here, the extent to which the believers of a belief are increased, its rationality

naturally is increased, and the extent to which the adherents of a religious belief are reduced, its rationality naturally is reduced. In this case, please consider the following beliefs as samples: 1. God exists; 2. There is an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-benevolent God; 3. Abraham was God's Prophet; 4. Muhammad was God's Messenger; or Jesus is God's Son; 5. Ali Ibn Abi Taleb is the first Imam of Shia Muslims, or the Pope is an infallible leader of Catholics; 6. Imam Reza is the eighth Imam of Shia Muslims, or the Catholic Church is the only way of salvation; 7. The holy shrine/church of our city heals all requirements. Here, the first belief is adhered to by all theists, including divine and non-divine. The second belief is accepted by believers of all divine religions and some non-divine ones. The third belief is related to only divine religions' believers. The fourth belief is accepted only by Muslims or Christians. The fifth belief is related to Shia Muslims or Catholics, the sixth belief pertains to Shia Imamiyah or Catholics, and the seventh only to the Shia/Imamiyah/ or Catholic group of a city. The significance of such criteria is that they pay attention to those religious beliefs that are outside of a religious tradition and have more acceptability and rationality. It is also possible to see some beliefs that have limited credibility and rationality only within a religious tradition, or a theological sect, or one of its branches. Consequently, to the extent that the acceptance and common welcoming of religious belief are reduced outward or inward to a religious tradition, the degree of their rationality naturally decreases. It should be noted that such criteria don't indicate the theoretical irrationality of religious beliefs of one branch of a religious sect, like Shia Imamiyah's believing in the Imamate of Imam Reza, but it means such a belief has rationality only for these religious believers, and we shouldn't extend its rationality to other branches of this sect, like Zeidi's and Ismailis, and to other divine religions' believers, like Christians and Jews. In fact, this criterion teaches us that every religious belief is part of two kinds of rationality: outward and inward of religion, and the latter is divided into kinds, including within and outside of a religious sect. So, for example, it is irrational to expect Christians to believe in the Imamate of Ali Ibn Abi Taleb while they have not accepted the Prophethood of Muhammad as the Prophet of Islam. Since every religious belief has its appropriate meaning in the framework of religious beliefs' web, we should not expect more than that.

## **2.9. The Possibility of Less Error in Religious Belief Understanding**

The possibility of reducing errors in accepting religious beliefs is related to the degree of their rationality. There are some beliefs in divine religious traditions and theistic attitudes that suggest the possibility of making errors in understanding them is greatly reduced. On the contrary, there are some beliefs that suggest the errors of believers in accepting

them are gradually increasing. In this case, consider the following beliefs: 1. God exists; 2. God is aware of our actions and beliefs; and 3. God is an all-powerful, omniscient, omnipotent, and all-benevolent being. 4. Nothing can be done by humans apart from divine will; 5. All of our free deeds are motivated by divine will; 6. The Prophet of Islam was immune to all errors and sins; and 7. The way of the three early Islamic caliphates served as the political paradigm for Muslims. 8. Three early Islamic caliphates made many mistakes. 9. It is a necessary and legal obligation to obey an Islamic governor, even if he is the oppressor. 10. Mourning for our martyred saints leads to forgiveness of our sins. If these samples are taken into account precisely, it is seen that the first belief is roughly the same for all theists and making errors regarding it is minimal. However, in the process of understanding and accepting the second to fifth beliefs, our errors are gradually increasing. These increasing errors are caused by reforming religious denominations and attitudes. There are also beliefs like the seventh to tenth for which the mistakes of believers are mostly increased regarding understanding and accepting them. Here, attention should be paid to the role of epistemic and non-epistemic factors in increasing our errors concerning understanding and accepting religious beliefs. Epistemic factors include mental presuppositions, our attitude to reason, experience, intuition, religious texts, and religious leaders' authority that can color our approach to religious beliefs. Non-epistemic factors also influence our quality of understanding and acceptance or rejection of religious beliefs. These include cultural, geographical, political, and racial circumstances as well as our professional, mundane, and caste benefits. Therefore, as much as the effects of epistemic and non-epistemic factors are positive, the measure of believers' mistakes regarding understanding and interpreting religious beliefs is reduced, and as much as the effects of the mentioned factors are negative, believers' errors are gradually increased. At the same time, the effectiveness of the cited factors is not equal in the totality of religious beliefs, but as long as religious beliefs are universal, logical, global, and immutable, believers make fewer mistakes regarding understanding and accepting them, and as much as their logicity, universality, and immutability are decreased, believers' errors are increased concerning understanding them.

### **2.10. The Foundation of Religious Texts' Authority**

The dependency or independence of religious beliefs on religious texts' authority is one of the most significant criteria regarding the rationality of religious beliefs. Hence, in the first step, we can divide religious beliefs into two kinds: independent and dependent. Independent religious beliefs are mostly inferred through logical demonstration and also through experience or intuition, with logical demonstration indicating the highest level of their rationality. For example: 1. God exists;

2. God is merciful and just; 3. We should obey the commands of the Prophet and religious leaders; 4. The Prophet is infallible in reciting revelation and performing religious acts; 5. Prayer and fasting are legal obligations; and 6. Every Muslim who has enough ability should go on pilgrimage. It is shown that the first and second beliefs are completely understandable and arguable independent of religious texts' authority, such as the Quran. The third and fourth beliefs can also be credible both based on religious texts and independently, although their rational demonstration is more difficult than referring to religious texts' authority. The fifth and sixth beliefs, however, have credibility only based on and by referring to religious texts' authority, although it is hardly possible to provide logical arguments for all mentioned beliefs. It should be noticed that the demonstrations pertaining to the first and second beliefs have their own credibility outside of any religious tradition, but the arguments concerning the third and fourth beliefs have credibility mostly within a religious tradition. The demonstrations related to the fifth and sixth beliefs have their own credibility completely within a religious tradition. As a result, the rational value of the first and second beliefs is highest, the credibility of the third and fourth beliefs is middle, and the rational credibility of the fifth and sixth beliefs is lowest. Here, it is necessary to explain that whenever the credibility of religious beliefs is directly or indirectly dependent on the authority of religious texts, we can speak of the role of imitation. That is, as much as the rational credibility of religious beliefs is decreased, their imitative credibility is increased. Meanwhile, being imitative of theological and jurisprudential beliefs is not the same. Regarding theological beliefs, human beings always try to find the best belief and rational way through investigating among different viewpoints by using their reason. Although it may be, they finally obey the theory of a theologian, but try to choose the most logical theory. Concerning jurisprudential beliefs and legal deeds, however, people seek the easiest practices and do not pay more attention to their logicity.

### **2.11 The Foundation for Religious Unity and Pluralism**

One of the interesting virtues of religious beliefs' systems is their role regarding religious unity and plurality together. Now, religious beliefs that can serve both functions have greater rational value and credibility (Hick 1990, 110-111). In fact, the ability to create religious unity and integration, on the one hand, and to welcome a common understanding of religious beliefs, on the other hand, leads to coexistence and a peaceful life, which has always been requested by religions. In this case, it seems we can take into account three groups of religious beliefs: The first group is able to achieve both religious unity and pluralism. The second group is only due to religious pluralism and sometimes leads to forming religious conflicts and denominations. The third group is the result of localizing

religions and the growth of denominations. Please pay attention to these following beliefs: 1. God is a just and merciful being who does not oppress his servants. 2. God is the creator of all human kinds and desires their happiness and salvation. 3. The only way to salvation is through Christianity and Jesus. 4. The only way of salvation is to accept Islam based on Shia interpretation. 5. Pilgrimage to Shia Imam Shrines or Christian saints heals people. 6. Mourning for the holy martyred saints leads to the forgiveness of our sins. In these examples, the first and second beliefs, due to their commonality among most adherents of divine religions and even some non-divine religions, can be considered the basis of religious union and correlation. Third and fourth beliefs, however, show an exclusivist tendency to the religion and a special theological attitude, leading to religious tensions, separations, and conflicts among religions and denominations' followers. The fifth and sixth beliefs are the result of localization of a religion or denomination in a specific geography or by a religious leader. The significance of the first and second beliefs is that they can invite religious believers to interfaith dialogue and join their viewpoints. Even if they have different understandings of God's justice, benevolence, and other virtues, because there is relative consensus about the totality of divine omnipotence, omniscience, and absolute good, it is possible to access common understandings pertaining to these beliefs and build the foundation of peaceful coexistence. This is the case that Pope John Paul II spoke about in the announcement of the Second Christian Congress (1965), and recognized other religions' participation, like Islam's, concerning such beliefs and called for dialogue between Islam and Christianity. The cited announcement considers it the duty of the Church to improve unity and love among all nations and acknowledges that to find the answer to fundamental questions, human beings can look to different religions. He claims that the Catholic Church does not deny such religions' sacred and true teachings, because most of these religions' teachings introduce some radials of that truth that can save all human beings from astray. Meanwhile, the Church should introduce Jesus as the real way, truth, and life. Hence, Christians, while believing in their own religion, should proceed to dialogue with non-Christians in order to strengthen those moral and spiritual realities that they use in their culture and life (Vatican Council II 1965, 738–742).

So there are, in this regard, some beliefs that have a high level of rationality that, meanwhile, paying attention to plural understanding of religion, invite religion's followers to peaceful and religious unification and dialogue. There are, however, some religious beliefs that lead to religious tensions and separations and the formation of religious sectarians. These beliefs have a low level of rationality. Finally, there are some localized beliefs that it is hardly possible to defend their rationality since they are born of geographical, cultural, racial, and normative circumstances and are based on ethnic understanding of religion.

## 2.12 The Impact of Epistemic and Non-Epistemic Factors

One of the epistemic virtues of humans is their influence from epistemic and non-epistemic factors; while the fact of influence cannot be denied, the quality and quantity of influence differ. The measures of human beings' influence of epistemic factors include their level of knowledge, approach to intellect, experience, imitation, intuition, and the authority of religious texts and leaders. Their influence on non-epistemic factors depends on family education, ethnicity, race, cultural and geographical situations, social and professional positions, political benefits, and individual interests. When we consider the diversity of religious beliefs in the web of beliefs, the importance of such factors becomes clearer. For example, there are some Christian denominations such as Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant, or Islamic ones such as Shia and Sunnah, that each have their own understanding of religion, which is directly related to the role of epistemic and non-epistemic factors. Therefore, we do not want to study the reasons for the growth of such denominations but rather show how the mentioned factors more or less determine religious beliefs. For an exact understanding of this matter, we pay attention to some religious beliefs as follows: 1. God is just and merciful to all human beings; 2. God knows all of our affairs and can do anything; 3. All human beings' acts are controlled by divine will, and that we have no freewill; 4. God does not interfere with human beings' free acts; 5. Muhammad is the Prophet of Islam, or Jesus is the son of God; 6. Shia Imams can facilitate their followers' needs, or Catholic Pope can forgive sins of believers. As these examples show, the first and second beliefs are almost immune from the influences of believers' presuppositions and epistemic and non-epistemic factors, but not completely. Third and fourth beliefs, however, are influenced by our tendency to our religion and reason, so a plural understanding of these beliefs can lead to forming different sects. Finally, fifth and sixth beliefs are formed based on a special understanding of Shia Muslim groups or Catholic Christian groups, which have been more influenced from epistemic and non-epistemic factors. The rationality of religious beliefs is related to the extent to which they are influenced.

## 2.13. Having Suitable Practical Results

Having suitable practical results is one of the most significant criteria concerning assessing the rationality of religious beliefs (Stenmark 1995, 23–243). It means whatever belief that has more logical and suitable practical results has more rational value, and whatever belief that has unpleasant or weak outcomes has a lower level of rationality. So we can see the following examples: 1. God is compassionate and merciful to His servants; 2. God will check our good and bad deeds based on His justice

both in this world and the Hereafter; 3. All human beings are forced to divine will and have no freewill in their acts; 4. God does not interfere with human beings' free acts since they have given them up to themselves; 5. Accepting Shia Imams' guardianship and loving them leads to forgiveness of our sins; 6. Muslims' pilgrimage, visiting Kaaba, is caused to forgive all our sins. It should be noted that we don't want to assess the logical justification or coherency of beliefs, but their practical results are our main consideration that are produced based on our religious obligations. Commitment to the first belief leads to human beings' encouragement to divine grace and to stepping on the path of divine mercy. Believing in the second belief causes us to pay attention to the unpleasant outcomes of sins and hope to receive rewards for good deeds. So, the first and second beliefs have good practical results that are useful for spiritual evolution. For this reason, they have a high level of practical rationality. The third belief, due to ascribing all human beings' acts to God, has left to God the responsibility of their sins and opened our hands to committing sins through asking God to accept their responsibility. The fourth belief releases human beings from the divine power's realm and is led to some limitations concerning the divine realm and questioning divine agency. The fifth and sixth beliefs also religiously immunize human beings until through Shia Imams' mediation or religious pilgrimage for forgiveness of sins, they may commit them again. Therefore, these two beliefs have a low level of rationality. As a result, the ideal mundane and afterlife outcomes of religious beliefs have a direct relationship to rationality.

### **3. Relationship Between Religious Belief Web and Gradual Rationality**

When explaining the role of different criteria in assessing the measure of theoretical and practical rationality of religious beliefs, this question arises: what structure can be considered for the web of religious beliefs in which one can see the measure and degree of different beliefs' rationality based on the mentioned criteria? To answer this question, this research considers the web of religious beliefs at three different levels, including fundamental, middle, and marginal or localized beliefs. Fundamental beliefs, like believing in God or the hereafter, have some of the following virtues: 1. They can be demonstrated by logical arguments; 2. They are universal and global; 3. They have more compatibility with people's innate and common understanding; 4. They have more stability and less changeability; 5. They are free from religious texts' authority; 6. There is more consensus about them among followers of divine and even non-divine religions; 7. They have more simplicity and have more rational explanations than other ones; 8. There are fewer errors regarding understanding them among believers; 9. They can be considered as the basis of both religious unity and plurality, and make it possible to develop



interfaith dialogue; 10. They have fewer influences from believers' presuppositions and epistemic and non-epistemic factors; 11. They have more internal and external coherency and compatibility; and finally, 12. They have suitable practical results concerning the mundane and hereafter life of believers.

Middle beliefs, like believing in divine attributes, the relationship between God and the world and human beings, freedom and compulsory, faith and infidelity, idolatry and monotheism, and so on, however, have the following properties: 1. Their demonstrative degree is lower than that of fundamental beliefs; 2. Their universality and comprehensiveness gradually decline; 3. They have compatibility with the common understanding of a religious tradition or sect but not with the common teachings of all divine religions; 4. They have relative stability and changeability; 5. They can be demonstrated by both arguing within a religious tradition and referring to religious texts' authority; 6. They have a relative consensus among religions' followers or religious denominations; 7. They have relative simplicity and complexity; 8. They cause a different understanding of religion, which leads to forming religious sects and growing sectarian conflicts and tensions; 10. They depend on believers' presuppositions and epistemic and non-epistemic factors; 11. They have relative internal coherency and compatibility; 12. They have suitable practical results, and sometimes unpleasant ones.

Finally, we have marginal beliefs like believing in the sacredness of religious places, times, people, situations, events, stories, dreams, experiences, and so on that have the following virtues: 1. It is hard to formulate logical or demonstrative arguments for them, but they are mainly imitative and intuitive; 2. They are not universal and global, but are partial and are dependend on a special group or geography; 3. They have more compatibility with people's lives of economy, norms, customs, and culture than the common understanding of religion; 4. They have more changeability. 5. It is hard to ascribe them to religious texts but mostly relies on believers' imitation, intuition, and personal dreams or experiences; 6. There is no much required consensus concerning them among followers of a religion or a religious sect; 7. There are more possibilities for errors regarding understanding and interpreting them. 8. Instead of simplicity, they have superficial features. 9. They are the basis of localization of religion; 10. They have a very high dependency on believers' presuppositions and epistemic and non-epistemic factors; 11. They have less internal coherency and compatibility and sometimes some paradoxes with middle and fundamental beliefs; 12. Sometimes they have good and sometimes bad practical results (See: Qorbani 2017, 98-99).

Now, considering the given criteria and three levels of religious belief system, first, it is necessary to emphasize that there are some ontological and epistemological, hierarchical and gradual and longitudinal relations among these levels of religious belief. In fact, religious beliefs' system is

like a web or prism in which there are ontological and epistemological reciprocal relations between them. In other words, the simplest relation between them is that middle beliefs are dependent on fundamental beliefs, and marginal beliefs are dependent on middle ones. In fact, middle beliefs are the result of believers' understanding of fundamental ones, and marginal beliefs are introduced based on how believers understand middle ones. Now, we can say fundamental beliefs have the highest level of rationality, while middle beliefs have the middle level of rationality, and marginal beliefs have the lowest level of rationality. This conclusion does not deny the value of middle and marginal beliefs but indicates their place, origin, function, and rationality.

#### 4. Conclusion

Considering the rationality levels of religious belief systems, we get the following results:

1. We should invite religion's believers to a rational understanding of their religious belief system until they are aware of the significance and value of the fundamental level of beliefs. It is also necessary to reform believers' thoughts concerning middle beliefs and avoid extreme attachment to the marginal levels of beliefs. In fact, we should argue that the axis and base of religions are very fundamental beliefs, and that middle and marginal beliefs have secondary roles. Therefore, paying attention to fundamental beliefs is necessary for rationality.

2. Regarding looking at religions and religious sects, we should first notice fundamental and middle beliefs and not be concerned with marginal ones. Fundamental beliefs can be considered as the main basis and structure of divine and non-divine religions and sects. It is also possible that middle beliefs are caused by the separation of divine religions and religious denominations' followers, but through establishing interfaith dialogue we should try to build closer together thought. So, the basic role of fundamental beliefs is to create religious unity among followers of religions and religious sects. This role leads us to pay more attention to fundamental beliefs for the extension of peaceful coexistence of religions and religious sects. In fact, religious rationality requires that we focus on fundamental and middle beliefs of religions and on religious denominations' commonalities in order to make possible access to interfaith dialogue and reciprocal understanding.

3. Religions' commonalities at fundamental, middle, and marginal levels of beliefs and the importance of interfaith dialogue call us to the significance of comparative studies of religions and denominations. We welcome this approach because it helps us to understand our own and other religious tendencies. It means looking at our religious beliefs from others' perspectives makes it possible to reform our mistakes and rebuild them again. This matter, in the contemporary world, shows the rational

importance of religions' and denominations' approximation, so that whatever religion or sect welcomes this necessity, it indicates its efficient rationality.

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