

Knowledge through Participation: The Epistemic Status of Religious Belief

Wyn Boerckel

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Advisor: Professor Lowney

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Bertrand Russell was once asked how he would respond if he found himself standing before a holy God demanding to know why he did not believe in Him. He replied, “Not enough evidence, God, not enough evidence.”¹ Russell’s answer comes from a restrictive view on what counts as evidence that adheres to Descartes’ condition for knowing: “we... make it a rule to trust only what is completely known and incapable of being doubted.”² Descartes’ methodological skepticism led to an analytic approach by which only propositions that could be explicitly, clearly stated and verified through an equally precise method of inquiry could be accepted as knowledge.³ This approach, which follows explicit logical chains to indubitable foundations, I will refer to as “critical philosophy.”⁴

Critical philosophy has severely restricted the role of philosophy of religion. A hallmark of the critical approach is an acceptance of Locke’s epistemological ethics: belief ought not to go beyond what explicit data or premises entail.⁵ If religion affirms a reality that transcends the scientifically observable and explicitly describable, critical philosophy rules such claims from the beginning.⁶ The evidential requirements have led to two opposite responses from religious thinkers: fideism, where the claims of science or reason are seen as having little or no bearing on religious belief, and what Avery Dulles called “rational counter-critical apologetics,”⁷ where thinkers try to defend religious claims with public and explicit evidence more or less on critical philosophy’s terms. The project of this paper is to offer a third way to understanding religious claims by showing how the truth of Michael Polanyi’s dictum, “We know more than we can say,” shows the mistaken limitations of critical approach and opens a philosophically acceptable

¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Bantam Press, 2006), 131.

² Sharon Warner, *Experiencing the Knowing of Faith* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000), 23.

³ Walter B. Mead, “I Know More Than I Can Tell: The Insights of Michael Polanyi,” *Modern Age*, Summer 2007, 301.

⁴ Jerry H. Gill, *On Knowing God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 13.

⁵ Locke, Essay IV, xvii, 24 reprinted in Plantinga, “The Prospects for Natural Theology,” 291

⁶ Gill, *On Knowing God*, 13-14.

⁷ Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 13.

approach to knowing God. Specifically, I will show that critical philosophy's dismissal of certain religious claims hangs on false assumptions and that Michael Polanyi's theory of personal knowledge not only helps to dispel these mistakes, but also offers a fruitful point of departure from which to understand religious knowledge. Then, modifying William Alston's defense of the epistemic similarity between sense perception and mystical perception so that his argument fits within the post-critical understanding of the tacit nature of all knowledge, I will argue that mystical perception can provide a basis for religious knowledge.

In part one, I will examine the critical epistemological and metaphysical assumptions that contribute to the dismissal of certain religious knowledge claims, such as the efficacy of methodological doubt, an explicit foundation as a starting point for knowledge, the necessity of reductive analysis, the preference for knowledge devoid of human commitment.⁸ I will use the insights of the later Wittgenstein and Hilary Putnam to show why these assumptions are misguided or false, clearing the way for a new approach. In part two, I will present chemist-philosopher Michael Polanyi's theory of personal knowledge and show how it opens the way to religious knowing. For Polanyi, every act of knowing, including scientific and religious knowing, involves imagination, intellectual passion and the apprehension of a focal object (or meaningful integration) from tacit, unspecifiable clues, all of which require the active participation of the knower. Polanyi's embodied, participatory, and tacitly rooted conception of knowledge not only captures the process of scientific knowing, but also brings the understanding we gain from what Gill calls the activity of faith—searching, responding, deciding, and growing⁹—into the category of real knowledge. In part 4, I will argue for the veridical nature of mystical perception following an important insight from William Alston: because Christian

⁸ Charles Lowney, "Re-Thinking the Machine Metaphor since Descartes," *BSTS* 31, no. 3 (June 2011): 1, 21.

⁹ Gill, *On Knowing God*, 120.

mystical perception (CMP), like sense perception (SP), exhibits what Alston calls significant self-support and is socially established and internally consistent, it can provide justification for religious knowledge. I will also show how a Polanyian understanding of the structure of knowing in a mystical practice supports Alston's conclusions. In part four, I will discuss the epistemic status of religious belief and show that the full content of religious belief cannot be communicated discursively; to understand it, one must dwell within the practices. Because some religious claims affect the deepest part of a person, they cannot simply be accepted in the same way scientific claims can. I will contend that for those who do participate in and embrace religious practices, the understanding they gain can be justified. This paper will not be a "proof" of God's existence or similar claims, for some matters are beyond proving. Rather, it is a defense of religious personal knowledge.

Part One: Mistaken Assumptions

The purpose of this section is to show how the assumptions of critical philosophy bear against religion and defend religious claims by exposing the problems with those assumptions. By "critical philosophy", I refer to a constellation of philosophical traditions whose primary concern, according to Gill, is establishing the explicit inferential process as the only reliable way of gaining knowledge.¹⁰ It is vital to understand that in this section's critique I am not disparaging explicit inferential processes as such, but rather the scientific view that supposes that these methods supply the *only* path to secure knowledge. Following Hume, the critical approach looks to the data of sense experience as the foundation on which to build secure knowledge.¹¹ Every knowledge claim is subject to doubt and is considered guilty until proven

¹⁰ Gill, *On Knowing God*, 42.

¹¹ Gill, *On Knowing God*, 43.

innocent by a referential process that exhibits clear, explicit, and reversible premises.¹² We only have secure knowledge if it holds up under analysis from premises to conclusion and back again.¹³ The implication of this analysis is the ontological *reduction* of phenomena—mind, meaning, morality—to mere physical parts. These phenomena are seen, along with religion, as illusory human constructions (but, on some accounts, no less important for being human constructs).¹⁴ It is presumed that nothing is properly understood until the naturalistic reduction to what is truly real—molecules in motion—is made.

The reductionist drive to analyzable parts is seen in the emphasis on sophisticated symbolic logic. As Bertrand Russell wrote, “Modern analytical empiricism... differs from that of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume by its incorporation of mathematics and its development of a powerful logical technique... Its methods, in this respect, resemble those of science.”¹⁵ According to Gill, Russell, the early Wittgenstein, and A.J. Ayers, who built on the legacy of Descartes, Hume, and Kant, are the modern exemplars of the critical approach.¹⁶ Furthermore, critical philosophy stresses objectivity—the purification of human intent or commitments in knowledge. As Gill points out, personal factors, sometimes called “value judgments,” are regarded as a kind of contamination.¹⁷ In all, the critical approach affirms that one *cannot* know more than one can say. Knowledge is an explicit, referential affair, and anyone who affirms anything beyond is in danger of error; in Locke’s words, he does not “seek truth as he ought” and fails in his “duty as a rational creature.”¹⁸ The critical approach sets the rules of inquiry such that the only rational backing religious claims can have would come from natural theology. As

¹² Gill, *On Knowing God*, 46.

¹³ Gill, *On Knowing God*, 48.

¹⁴ Lowney, outline notes.

¹⁵ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1945), 834.

¹⁶ Gill, *On Knowing God*, 13.

¹⁷ Gill, *On Knowing God*, 49.

¹⁸ Locke, Essay IV, xvii, 24 reprinted in Plantinga, "The Prospects for Natural Theology," 291.

natural theology is seen as problematic and even at best supports only a deist conception of God, religious claims are seen as bankrupt. I aim to defend religious claims by undermining the assumptions that lead us to see the debate in this distorted light and support religious claims within the framework of personal knowledge.

When I speak of ‘knowledge,’ I do not mean ‘justified true belief.’ Gill points out that in critical thought, the standard criteria for knowledge include that (1) a person believe that such and such is the case (2) he must have good reasons, and (3) the belief must in fact be the case.¹⁹ Gill notes that it seems quite circular to require *knowing* that such and such is the case be included in one’s definition of knowledge. After all, how do we know that a belief is *in fact* the case? We rely on (2)—the strength of the good reasons. Therefore, when I speak of knowledge, I refer to justified belief. This means that legitimate knowledge claims may turn out to be false. The main insight of the American pragmatists was holding at once to fallibilism—the view that even our most deeply held views could turn out to be wrong, and anti-scepticism—the view that like belief, doubt requires grounds.²⁰ The pragmatist have their own critiques of foundationalism, scientism and reductionism are convincing, but to make way for an improved understanding of how knowing works, I will defer to Wittgenstein.

The insights of Wittgenstein undermine three of critical philosophy’s assumptions about knowing: the efficacy of methodological doubt, insistence on reductive analysis, and an explicit, foundational starting point for knowledge. Descartes’ method of doubt ironically gave rise to a critical epistemological approach that undermined the very religious beliefs he hoped to prove. As Louis Reid wrote, “Descartes... Hume ... Mill... Bertrand Russell... the neo-empiricists... have all exhorted us to the philosophers’ religion of doubt. The cardinal honesty, they seem to say, is

¹⁹ Gill, *On Knowing God*, 142.

²⁰ Putnam, *Pragmatism: An Open Question*, 21.

to refrain from belief and the cardinal dishonesty to hold belief.”²¹ Wittgenstein’s insights into the tacit, ineffable basis for knowledge dovetail nicely with the pragmatists’ fallibilism and anti-scepticism and set the stage for an improved understanding of epistemology.

Wittgenstein’s aim in his final work, *On Certainty*, was to consider the nature of certainty that pervades and undergirds all language, making it possible to doubt or affirm anything at all.²² He sought to show the tacit and fundamental nature of our experiential starting point. For Wittgenstein, we can neither doubt nor prove our sense experience as veridical, because it underpins the very language game²³ in which the doubt is expressed. For Wittgenstein, asking if I really “have a hand” is a meaningless question because such notions anchor our acts of knowing, doubting, and justifying. His insights not only bear the reliability of sense perception, but also on the nature of doubt.

Against Descartes, Wittgenstein argues that there must be “grounds for doubt” just as there must be grounds for belief.²⁴ We cannot subject whatever we like to doubt,²⁵ because doubt is, in Plant’s terms, “essentially parasitic”²⁶ upon belief. As Wittgenstein says, “Doubt comes after belief.”²⁷ Wittgenstein goes on: “If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty.”²⁸ For Wittgenstein, doubt only works within the language game or “system” in which all confirmation and

²¹ Louis Reid, review of *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, *British Journal of Educational Studies* 8, no. 1 (November 1959): 69-70 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3119338>.

²² Jerry H. Gill, "Saying and Showing: Radical Themes in Wittgenstein's 'On Certainty,'" *Religious Studies* 10, no. 3 (September 1974): 281-282, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20005175>.

²³ The richness of what Wittgenstein means by “language game” is important. Simply put, they are the speech practices whereby we discuss, evaluate, and express our forms of life.

²⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), §4.

²⁵ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §122

²⁶ Robert Plant, "Blasphemy, Dogmatism and Injustice: The Rough Edges of 'On Certainty,'" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 54, no. 2 (October 2003): 104, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40036607>

²⁷ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §160.

²⁸ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §115.

disconfirmation takes place.²⁹ Saying “I know,” does not mean for Wittgenstein that what is said must be incapable of being doubted. He shares the fallibilism of the pragmatists when he writes, “Of course it isn't true unless there is, but I have a right to say [‘I know that there is a chair there’] if I am sure there is a chair there, even if I am wrong.”³⁰ A knowledge claim need not be beyond all doubt; for Wittgenstein, saying “I know” is akin to saying “I swear”³¹ and “I have proper grounds for my statement.”³²

Gill sees Wittgenstein as saying that the nature of epistemological bedrock, like the bedrock of meaning in language discussed in the *Investigations*, cannot be explicitly stated, but can only be displayed or allowed to show itself, and every attempt to justify or doubt it is bound to end in confusion.³³ For Wittgenstein, all knowledge is essentially based in the tacit bedrock inherent in our forms of life, and trying to make these explicit misfires. The foundationalist project of finding some sure and explicit basis on which to build knowledge is doomed because knowledge is based in a tacit background that Wittgenstein (as we will see, somewhat mistakenly) thought was beyond explanation. For Wittgenstein, if we dig to find some sure foundation for knowledge, we will find our spade turned: “At the core of all well-founded belief, lies belief that is unfounded.”³⁴ Wittgenstein writes that “Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination [process of logical reasoning]” but rather our forms of life.³⁵ The same holds true for knowledge. Any inquiry starts with a set of tacit suppositions; no scientist can doubt if he has a hand as he conducts his inquiry. If he *were* to doubt such notions, he could not hope to prove them scientifically. To participate in a scientist’s form of life, he must uncritically

²⁹ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §105.

³⁰ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §549.

³¹ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §181.

³² Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §18.

³³ Gill, *Saying and Showing: Radical Themes in Wittgenstein's "On Certainty"*, 282.

³⁴ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §253.

³⁵ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* §475.

and tacitly “accept” that he has a hand.

According to Gill, the concept of tacit knowledge is vital to understanding Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*.³⁶ That we can and must know more than we can say is seen in his contention that “in the end logic cannot be described”³⁷ and that some notions may “not be correctly expressed at all.”³⁸ For Wittgenstein, these tacit, bedrock beliefs undergird the system that forms the point of departure in which confirmation and disconfirmation of hypotheses take place,³⁹ and thus tacit knowledge is logically prior to explicit knowledge. Wittgenstein’s insights cut against the critical picture of knowing in three ways. First, by affirming the reality of tacit knowing, he shows that the requirement that all knowledge be explicit, analyzable, and based on clear, foundational notions is too stringent. Secondly, by showing that since doubt is parasitic on belief and necessarily requires grounds, hyperbolic doubt is misguided. Finally, by showing how knowledge is always learned by participating in language games, he helps us see that knowledge is not mere impersonal mental assent to propositions but something we participate in. He writes, “‘I know’ ... expresses a form of life.”⁴⁰ As Gill summarizes Wittgenstein’s point, “knowing *that* is not, in the final analysis, clearly distinguishable from knowing *how*.”⁴¹

The upshot for religious knowledge claims is that an explicit referential process from a clear and firm foundation is not necessary; religious knowledge can be gained tacitly through participating in a particular form of life. That religious knowledge (as we will see more clearly later on) has a tacit basis does not mean it has a significantly inferior epistemic status than other kinds of knowledge, because *all* knowledge, tacit and explicit, has a tacit basis in our forms of

³⁶ Gill, *Saying and Showing: Radical Themes in Wittgenstein's "On Certainty"*, 285 .

³⁷ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §501.

³⁸ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §37 .

³⁹ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §105.

⁴⁰ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §358.

⁴¹ Gill, *Saying and Showing: Radical Themes in Wittgenstein's "On Certainty,"* 285.

life. The premises for explicit arguments cannot come from other explicit arguments *ad infinitum*. Wittgenstein thought that the starting point for all knowledge was in the end inexpressible. Similarly, Polanyi saw knowledge as a skillful integration of tacit clues. Unlike Wittgenstein, however, Polanyi thought tacit knowledge could help us build up to metaphysical and religious propositions where Wittgenstein thought only mere description was possible.⁴²

One of the mistaken assumptions critical philosophy brings to the debate is the idea that trustworthy knowledge must be purely objective. The claim is that personal factors (“value judgments”) should be left out to preserve pure objectivity. As religious claims obviously involve personal commitment and statements about the way we ought to be, it is seen as having an inferior epistemic status. Science is seen as having a ‘purity’ that religion lacks, rendering the knowledge religion purports to provide untrustworthy. I contend that purely objective knowledge is not possible, and even if it were, it would be undesirable. Following Hilary Putnam, I will show how critical philosophy’s preference for Hume’s strong fact/value distinction and a ‘pure facts’ picture of knowledge free of theoretical interpretation is misguided. Religious knowledge is not worse off for involving personal factors because *all* knowledge involves such judgments.

One of Putnam’s key insights is that before we can come to knowledge of any scientific fact or theory, we must make a series of values judgments. For Putnam, the fact/value distinction is at “least hopelessly fuzzy” because values are presupposed in the practices of scientific inquiry and even in facts themselves.⁴³ For Putnam, theory choice relies on values like ‘coherent,’ ‘simple,’ ‘justified’—which like the value terms ‘good’ or ‘beautiful’ are historically conditioned and subject to philosophical debate. These are the basis by which we determine

⁴² Charles Lowney, "Wittgenstein and Polanyi: Metaphysics Reconsidered," 21; *Philosophical Investigations*, §109.

⁴³ Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 136.

which facts are important and how they fit into theories.⁴⁴ Putnam writes, “without the cognitive values of coherence, simplicity, and instrumental efficacy we have no world and no facts, not even facts about what is relative to what.”⁴⁵ Putnam argues that to accept a conception of rationality broad enough to embrace philosophy, history, psychology, we must embrace much that is “vague, ill defined, no more capable of being ‘scientized’ than was the knowledge of our forefathers.”⁴⁶

Putnam shows that because they are prior, the values on which we base scientific enquiry are not reducible to physical notions or governed by syntactically precise rules.⁴⁷ Putnam helps us see that the traditional depreciation of ‘value-laden’ knowledge—the humanities and religion, for instance—in favor of ‘objective’ science fails because all intellectual pursuits are value-laden. The difference is one of degree, not kind. Understanding that values and facts depend on one another helps draw out the confusion in a naturalistic (or religious) person claiming to have pure, objective *facts* on his side. In our paradigms of explanation, scientific and otherwise, Putnam claims that “*value* issues are involved, for the decision as to what *counts* as ‘coherent’ and what counts as ‘outrée’ [bizarre or outrageous] is in every sense a value judgment.”⁴⁸ Because values are prior to facts, the disagreement between religious and secular ways of thinking is primarily about values and interpretations, not facts per se.

Because we bring our values and background beliefs to any act of knowing, there is a *personal* element to it. For Putnam, we do not start with the “totality of observational facts” in hand when we inquire about our world; theories and even observational facts will depend partly

⁴⁴ Putnam, “Beyond the Fact-Value Dichotomy,” 6.

⁴⁵ Putnam, “Beyond the Fact-Value Dichotomy,” 6.

⁴⁶ Putnam, “Beyond the Fact-Value Dichotomy,” 10.

⁴⁷ Putnam, “Beyond the Fact-Value Dichotomy,” 10.

⁴⁸ Hilary Putnam, *Pragmatism: An Open Question*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 16.

on the values of our cultural epoch.⁴⁹ Critical philosophy's insistence on objective facts purified of human intent is chimera. Putnam points to an insight of William James:

I... cannot escape the consideration... that the knower is not simply a mirror floating with no foothold anywhere, and passively reflecting an order that he comes upon and finds simply existing. The knower is an actor, and coefficient of the truth on one side, while on the other he registers the truth which he helps to create.⁵⁰

Knowing is, in the end, inseparable from the knower. It is a participatory act. Putnam, like Gill, draws upon Wittgenstein's insight that knowledge comes from our forms of life.⁵¹

The upshot of Putnam's insights for religious knowledge is that it should not be relegated to an inferior epistemic status on account of involving value judgments because such judgments are integral to any intellectual pursuit. The legacy of the fact/value dichotomy causes us to see a world in which we have objective, scientific facts on one hand, and the messy, unreliable, and subjective realm of values on the other. Critical philosophy invariably relegates religious claims to the latter camp and summarily dismisses them. A strong separation of fact and value invites us to choose between faith and reason as if they were mutually exclusive. Putnam helps us see that because all modes of inquiry exhibit the 'messy,' subjective elements of the knower's participation in knowledge, religious knowledge should not be dismissed so easily.

Part Two: Knowledge We Participate In

Thus far, in the insights of Wittgenstein and Putnam we have seen how all knowledge has a tacit basis and is inextricably linked to values. Michael Polanyi's insights into the personal element in knowledge and the structure of tacit clues further bring scientific and religious modes of knowing closer together. In his own inquiries as a chemist, Michael Polanyi saw that the

⁴⁹ Putnam, *Pragmatism: An Open Question*, 17.

⁵⁰ Putnam, *Pragmatism: An Open Question*, 17.

⁵¹ Putnam, *Pragmatism: An Open Question*, 21.

critical picture of knowing did not align with the way he and his fellow scientists in fact sought truth. Polanyi saw that the distinguishing features of critical philosophy—a focus on pure objectivity, ontological reduction of phenomena, and foundationalism—not only misrepresented scientific discovery, but also proved particularly harmful to other fields of inquiry. In *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi set out to undermine these false conceptions and show how personal commitment and personal participation of the knower are crucial to all acts of knowing.⁵²

Polanyi thought that science had misstepped in making the replacement of “all human knowledge by a complete knowledge of atoms in motion” an ideal goal. This goal is problematic because such a reduction is not necessarily interesting to us as human beings.⁵³ Many of the questions that the softer sciences like psychology and biology seek to answer are not apparent when reduced to the level of atoms. For Polanyi, the goal of reducing knowledge to formulae and impersonal statements is incomplete because formulae and statements are meaningless without the intentions of the persons who make them and without tacit suppositions of which they are never fully aware.⁵⁴ Kierkegaard, for instance, points out that science can give all sorts of measurements for death, but cannot tell us what we find truly important: what does it mean for *me* to die?⁵⁵ Some questions science is simply not equipped to answer. Critical philosophy’s overly stringent epistemological standards push us to despair of ever finding answers or push us to deny meaningfulness to the questions, a consequence Polanyi saw as dangerous to human inquiry. Demands that all meaningful questions be verifiable (as in the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle) or falsifiable (as in Popper’s falsificationism) are too stringent. The tacit basis for all knowledge that Wittgenstein and Polanyi saw undermines the need for verifiability *or*

⁵² Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, vii.

⁵³ *Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, Meaning (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1917), 25.*

⁵⁴ Louis Arnold Reid, *Personal Knowledge Review*, 63.

⁵⁵ Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 167.

falsifiability for the key notions in our interpretive frameworks.⁵⁶ Essentially tacit notions resist scientific testing.

In his magnum opus, *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi offered instead a picture of knowing that involved imagination and intellectual passion combined with apprehension from tacit, unspecifiable clues to a meaningful integration. Polanyi's understanding of knowing and in particular his insights into the tacit dimension are important because, as I will show, with the help of Alston, they open the possibility of knowing God.

In "Knowing and Being," Polanyi asks us to consider the following example:

A Few years ago a distinguished psychiatrist demonstrated to his students a patient who was having a mild fit of some kind. Later the class discussed the question whether this had been an epileptic or a hystero-epileptic seizure. The matter was finally decided by the psychiatrist: "Gentlemen", he said, "you have seen a true epileptic seizure. I cannot tell you how to recognize it; you will learn this by more extensive experience."⁵⁷

The psychiatrist knew how to recognize the disease, but was at a loss to explain *how* he knew. That the subtle clues of an authentic seizure cannot be specified highlights an important point in Polanyi's argument made from what he terms *Gestalt-psychology*. *Gestalt-psychology* has taught us that the specifiability of clues remains incomplete in two ways. First, there is always a residue of particulars left unspecified—we cannot focus on or identify them even if we tried. Secondly, even when particulars can be identified, focusing on them in isolation changes their appearance to some extent.⁵⁸ This is because they no longer perform the same function and by attending to them, we in turn attend from other tacit clues.⁵⁹ For instance, were the psychiatrist to focus on the extent of dilation in the patient's pupils, the *gestalt* awareness of his overall condition would disappear. All the clues must be held tacitly for the integration to proceed.

⁵⁶ Lowney, comments

⁵⁷ Michael Polanyi, "Knowing and Being," *Mind* 70, no. 280 (October 1961): 458, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/221>.

⁵⁸ Michael Polanyi, "Knowing and Being," 458-459.

⁵⁹ Lowney, "Wittgenstein and Polanyi: Metaphysics Reconsidered," 21.

Although the tacit clues themselves are often unspecifiable, they have a “vectoral quality” that points us directly to the joint focal meaning.⁶⁰ Polanyi uses linguistic comprehension as an example. When we attend to a word on a page, we understand the word from the letters acting as clues. Likewise, when we attend to the meaning of a sentence, the words and their order serve as clues that point to the focal meaning. Looking at the letters themselves, as one might study a geometric shape, is quite different from looking from the letters to see the meaning of the word.⁶¹ For Polanyi, true knowing and discovery requires an alteration between analysis and integration. A medical student diagnoses disease by learning a list of its symptoms, but only through practice and training can he hope to integrate the (often tacit) clues to form a correct diagnosis. Merely following the explicit rules one memorized in med-school can yield an erroneous—yet possibly more plausible—diagnosis.⁶²

Polanyi identifies three centers of tacit knowledge: the subsidiary particulars, the focal target, and the knower who integrates the subsidiary particulars to come to a deeper knowledge of the focus of his attention.⁶³ The knower takes an active, participatory role in all knowledge, and every act of knowing involves these three features. Polanyi saw this combining of tacit clues into knowledge as a skill. A skilled knower has mastered both analysis—proceeding from wholes to an understanding of its parts—and integration—the recognition of parts working towards understanding their relation within the whole.⁶⁴ These cannot effectively be performed simultaneously. Focusing directly on the clues eliminates our ability to see their joint significance. When a pianist shifts his attention from the flow of the piece to the striking of

⁶⁰ Lowney, “Wittgenstein and Polanyi: Metaphysics Reconsidered,” 21.

⁶¹ Lowney, “Wittgenstein and Polanyi: Metaphysics Reconsidered,” 21.

⁶² Polanyi, “Knowing and Being,” 460.

⁶³ Polanyi, *Meaning* 38.

⁶⁴ Polanyi, “Knowing and Being,” 459.

his fingers on the keys, the music falters.⁶⁵ Conversely, as we attend to the joint significance, the particulars become “submerged in the whole” and fade from view.⁶⁶ The structure of tacit knowledge resists reductive analysis because analysis and integration cannot be performed at once.

Skilled knowing is not confined to the realm of embodied skills; science itself is based on a gestalt-like integration of particulars.⁶⁷ Konrad Lorenz demonstrated that the speed and complexity of tacit integration far outstrips any explicit considerations of evidence.⁶⁸ Einstein’s description of seeing the idea of relativity as “intuitively clear” indicates that exceedingly skilled tacit integrations were at work.⁶⁹ For Polanyi, the acceptance of the sweeping theories like those found in modern physics cannot be accounted for simply by the accumulation of facts; “the beauty and profundity of these theories draw us.”⁷⁰ In *From Copernicus to Einstein* Hans Reichenbach wrote,

There seems to exist something like an instinct for the hidden intentions of nature, and whoever possesses this instinct, takes the spade to the right place where gold is hidden, and thus arrives at deep scientific insights. It must be said that Einstein possesses this instinct to the highest degree.⁷¹

Even ‘ordinary’ science is based on tacit integration. From the embodied skills of pipetting solutions and measuring tiny distances to the learned, intuitive instincts that alert a scientist when his data are problematic, skillful tacit integration is essential to science. In the same way an expert English professor can integrate the tacitly held elements of tone, plot, ethos, and characters to see a particular insight in a novel, expert scientists integrate theory, data, and their

⁶⁵ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 56.

⁶⁶ Polanyi, “Knowing and Being,” 460.

⁶⁷ Polanyi, *Meaning* 42.

⁶⁸ Polanyi, *Meaning* 42.

⁶⁹ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 33.

⁷⁰ *Personal Knowledge*, 15.

⁷¹ Hans Reichenbach, *From Copernicus to Einstein* (New York: Steingold, n.d.), 94.

own intuitive judgments to see new insights about our world. Part of skillful knowing involves what Polanyi calls heuristic passion—the intellectual fervor that both evokes intimations of future discoveries and sustains the knower through the long hours of inquiry.⁷² Instead of discouraging such passion as transgressing objectivity, Polanyi thought we should encourage it as essential. Heuristic passion is part of the *personal* element in all knowledge, for it can only be supplied by the knower. The features of tacit integrations, intuitive intimations, the judgments concerning beauty and profundity, and heuristic passion are not only important in science but also in the mystic’s inquiries into religious reality.

Polanyi saw that the participatory nature of knowing meant that knowledge was not something merely assented to but rather *dwelt within*. Polanyi writes,

When we accept a certain set of pre-suppositions and use them as our interpretive framework, we may be said to dwell in them as we do in our own body. Their uncritical acceptance for the time being consist in a process of assimilation by which we identify ourselves with them. They are not asserted and cannot be asserted, for assertion can be made only within a framework with which we have identified ourselves for the time being... it is by his assimilation of the framework of science that a scientist makes sense of experience.⁷³

To an extent, Polanyi is getting at a similar insight of Wittgenstein’s: “All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation takes place already within a system,” which is the “element in which arguments have their life.”⁷⁴ While Wittgenstein would say that this tacit system is “not based on grounds. It is there—like our life,”⁷⁵ Polanyi employs a structure of tacit clues to explain how a scientist makes sense of his experience. Underneath all the scientific graphs, equations, and computations, Polanyi shows that tacit integration and personal, human intent lies

⁷² *Personal Knowledge* 143.

⁷³ *Personal Knowledge*, 60.

⁷⁴ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, #105.

⁷⁵ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, #559.

at the basis of knowledge.⁷⁶ By dwelling within a certain set of practices—scientific, philosophical, or religious—we learn the skillful tacit integrations appropriate for gaining knowledge of that field. Indwelling is, in Polanyi’s terms, a “form of mental existence.”⁷⁷ By reading a book of chess strategy, for instance, one dwells within the mind of the master—the moves serving as clues to the master’s mind and strategy.⁷⁸ Of course, to *really* understand the chess master, one must participate in chess—play in tournaments, understand the lingo, use a chess clock, ect. To really understand philosophy, biochemistry, or Christianity, one must dwell in that framework and live that form of life *within a community*. Scientists play a crucial role in helping other scientists from going off-track. Esteemed scientists serve as authorities in a similar way that pastors and teachers keep people from going astray in religious communities.

It is within these communities that our knowledge claims can be evaluated on the validation-verification continuum. For Polanyi, the validation of what he terms a “mental dwelling place” like the physical sciences, religion, or mathematics is dependent on the gradual appreciation and acceptance of a field’s consistency, ingenuity, and profundity based on experience.⁷⁹ We see the experience of the physical sciences as offering *verification*—although where ‘hard’ data is lacking—such as some areas of theoretical physics, validation is more appropriate. Polanyi writes, “As we pass from verification to validation we rely increasingly on internal rather than external evidence.”⁸⁰ A scientific theory is validated when it convincingly satisfies what Polanyi called the “heuristic craving which invoked” the original inquiry.⁸¹ In a similar vein, religion can be aligned with other pursuits by becoming fruitful “dwelling places of

⁷⁶ Personal Knowledge, 64.

⁷⁷ “Knowing and Being,” 468.

⁷⁸ Polanyi, *Meaning*, 48.

⁷⁹ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 202.

⁸⁰ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 338.

⁸¹ Avery Dulles, “Faith, Church, and God: Insights from Michael Polanyi,” *Theological Studies*, 539, <http://www.ts.mu.edu/readers/content/pdf/45/45.3/45.3.6.pdf>.

the human mind.”⁸² Religion as well as science can offer answers to our pressing questions. For Polanyi, our belief can be further validated by their “inherent intellectual beauty” and cognitive and practical fruitfulness.⁸³

Polanyi showed that all knowing involves a leap from tacit clues into the realm of the (presently) unverifiable. All scientific discoveries begin with an integrative discovery from tacit clues—a leap followed by analysis and verification.⁸⁴ Unlike science, the propositions of the humanities and religion we generally speak of as being validated. When Wittgenstein wrote, “Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgement,”⁸⁵ he meant that there is no strict rule by which we can judge true and false, but must rely on the acknowledgement of the communities we trust. Tacit clues inform us with a foreknowledge of where a new insight into reality might lie—the claims we should like to test. In science and religion, tacit clues guide our leaps of faith. Avery Dulles points to Augustine and Pascal’s conviction that they could not have rightly sought God without first experiencing intimations of the One for whom they had been searching all along.⁸⁶ Polanyi writes, “There is no other way of approaching a hidden meaning than by entrusting ourselves to our intimations of its yet unseen presence.”⁸⁷ Polanyi’s conception of foreknowledge helps us solve the paradox of inquiry found in the *Meno*. Plato saw that one “cannot search for what he knows—since he knows it, there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for”⁸⁸ For Polanyi, we have some sense of what to look for because the foreknowledge tacit clues give us guide our inquiries.

The most serious charge against Polanyi’s conception of personal knowledge is that it

⁸² Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 280.

⁸³ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 280.

⁸⁴ Polanyi, “Knowing and Being,” 464.

⁸⁵ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §378.

⁸⁶ Avery Dulles, “Faith, Church, and God: Insights from Michael Polanyi,” 539.

⁸⁷ Michael Polanyi, “Faith and Reason,” *The Journal of Religion* 41, no. 4 (October 1961): 243, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1200970>.

⁸⁸ *Meno*, 80e; Polanyi, *Meaning* 52.

collapses into relativism. If someone else relies on a different framework with just as much conviction, has a different understanding of theoretical profundity, and processes a different set of skills for tacit integration than I do, we can arrive at contradictory (or perhaps incommensurable) knowledge claims. Polanyi's understanding of knowledge, however, is not relativistic. Any claim to have made contact with reality must carry with it the claim of being universally, objectively true.⁸⁹ For Polanyi, every knower accepts the obligation to pursue truth through his "own intimations of reality" within the bounds of universal intent.⁹⁰ We must admit that we cannot always definitively adjudicate between contradictory knowledge claims—this is why the pragmatists allowed for even our most secure knowledge to turn out false. Professor Lowney points out that this universal intent represents a significant breaking of the fact/value dichotomy by acknowledging the reality of the knower's *responsibility* to truth. Without the values of intellectual honesty and universal intent, there could be no facts.

Polanyi's conception of reality and knowing opens the way for religious modes of knowing. Polanyi's insights demonstrate that faith is not an irrational leap because the tacit background clues we apprehend might make faith in God persuasive and compelling. For Polanyi, the *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding) applies to science as well as religion. To apprehend any knowledge for Polanyi is "always an act of hope akin to the dynamism of all human faith."⁹¹ Any inquiry begins with faith in our powers to envision problems, see solutions, and distinguish between viable and counterfeit solutions.⁹² For Polanyi, discovery is possible only if we entrust ourselves to the tacit clues that point us to a hidden

⁸⁹Polanyi, "Knowing and Being," 30.

⁹⁰ Polanyi, "Knowing and Being," 30.

⁹¹ Polanyi, "Faith and Reason," 243.

⁹² Avery Dulles, "Faith, Church, and God: Insights from Michael Polanyi," 539.

meaning.⁹³ Philosophy, science, and religion are all united in their mission to understand the universe as “one comprehensive whole.”⁹⁴ This is the only path to intellectual mastery of our surroundings. For Polanyi, religious faith is the similar to all kinds of knowing—the dynamic impulse to push our understanding of our world still further.⁹⁵ Knowledge always involves new surmises and hidden, indeterminate implications. For instance, Dalton's atomic theory confirmed Boyle's previous speculation on the structure of crystals, who drew upon the ideas Lucretius and Epicurus posed. Today, we know Dalton's prescient surmises in atomic theory at the beginning of the 19th century to be surprisingly accurate.⁹⁶ Of course, not all tacit intimations lead anywhere fruitful, but such is the nature of things for Polanyi: “So all true knowledge is inherently hazardous.”⁹⁷ The difference between religious speculation and scientific speculation comes as one of degree. The propositions of science will be more readily verifiable than the propositions of theology, but that does not rule them out. Polanyi wrote that we can establish a continuous ascent from our less personal knowing of inanimate matter to our convivial knowing of living beings and beyond this to the knowing of our responsible fellow men. Such I believe is the true transition from the sciences to the humanities and also from our knowing the laws of nature to our knowing the person of God.⁹⁸

Polanyi’s understanding of how tacit integration works provides us with a comprehensive entity that may help support Alston’s conception of a perception of God.

Religious belief in God is supported primarily by tacit knowledge. Consider the following illustration of the above theorizing. Romantic love is an experience common to many, but only the very best poets can hope to capture the feeling in words. Even then, the poets like Shakespeare and Byron do not give us a fully explicit account of romantic love, but fill their

⁹³ Polanyi, “Faith and Reason,” 243.

⁹⁴ Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1946), 27.

⁹⁵ Polanyi, “Faith and Reason,” 244.

⁹⁶ Polanyi, “Faith and Reason,” 244.

⁹⁷ Polanyi, “Faith and Reason,” 244.

⁹⁸ Polanyi, “Faith and Reason,” 245.

work with metaphors and allusions that only one who has experienced love for himself can fully understand. There is a depth to a husband and wife's relationship that neither of them could ever make fully explicit. In romantic love, we plumb the depths of another person and only tacitly. A husband could not hope to make another understand his wife the way he does, unless that other person married her himself. The relational, tacit knowledge we gain of God functions in an analogous way. Jesus said, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me... As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love."⁹⁹ I wish I could explain, even poetically, what it is like to remain in Christ's love like fruit on a vine. I wish I could explain *exactly how* such experiences and tacit integrations make belief in God persuasive and compelling. But some joys cannot be made explicit. Most love-sick people find their words about their lover to be cheap and inadequate compared to the depth of their experience. Religious experts like St. Augustine who have a knack for such writing are as rare as poets like Shakespeare.

Polanyi's structure of tacit clues, indwelling, personal participation, and heuristic passion show how we could come to such a knowledge of God. As with scientific frameworks, we *indwell* a religious framework and we attend to it subsidiarily as we participate in religious practices. Like following the chess master's moves to master the game of chess, a Christian dwells within the mind of Jesus by reading and following his words and actions. Religious persons apprehend from human society, the beauty and complexity of nature, the stirrings of conscience, the historical record, and in the various dimensions of our lives that we live in the presence of God. For Gill, these features constitute the glass through which we see God—albeit darkly.¹⁰⁰ Like the theory of relativity, the concepts of sin, grace, and redemption open our

⁹⁹ John 15:4,9 ESV

¹⁰⁰ Gill, *On knowing God*, 149.

minds to a new way of seeing the world that (presumably) brings us closer to reality.

There can be no final, foundational justification for the tacit knowledge of God. Even when I assert “there is something that thinks,” or “I have the incorrigible sensation of a table,” I attend from background beliefs and the tacit clues in language. In order to say we know anything at all, we must accept the reality of tacit knowing. I have already admitted, however, that our tacit knowing faculties can and do go wrong. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that we must either accept the skillful tacit integrations of an expert based on authority, or become an authority ourselves. Suppose a trained art critic looks at two very similar paintings (to me, at least) and declares one genuine and the other a forgery. I take him at his word only because I trust him as an authority, not because I see what his trained eye sees. Similarly, the trained expert in mystical perception may have insights others don’t, but what reason do we have to suppose that the mystic’s tacit integrations are directing him to something *real*? How can we come to an understanding of what God is like? On the validation-verification continuum, where should we place religious belief? The justification we might have for supposing these integrations to be veridical will be considered in part three.

Part Three: Sense Perception and Religious Perception

In his book *Perceiving God*, William Alston defends religious experience as offering justification for religious belief. Alston aims to show that what he terms Christian mystical perceptual practice (CMP) has similar epistemic credentials to sense perception (SP). Although both SP and CMP cannot be non-circularly shown to be reliable, both are socially established doxastic (belief forming) practices, internally consistent, have distinctive input-output functions,

a functioning overrider system, and exhibit what Alston calls significant self-support.¹⁰¹ For Alston, provided we have no sufficient reason to regard it as unreliable, CMP's epistemic credentials are such that it is rational to engage in and its outputs are prima facie justified.¹⁰² The inputs of the doxastic practice of CMP are direct religious experiences and the outputs are beliefs about God—that He is loving, good, and active in the world.¹⁰³ Alston's claim is not that CMP is just as reliable as SP, but that it has a similar structure and our confidence in the reality of the objects presented can be similar. In what follows, I will present Alston's defense of CMP as having the relevant features of a justified and reliable doxastic practice and consider objections. I will also show both how Alston's doxastic practice approach supports the religious personal knowledge claims and the conclusions of the previous section and how Polanyi's understanding of how we approach reality supports to possibility of veridical perception of God.

The starting point for Alston's investigation is direct, non-sensory perception, involving a presentation or appearance of something to the subject, identified by the subject as God.¹⁰⁴ By direct experience, Alston means immediately present to the subject; the relationship is basic and unanalyzable.¹⁰⁵ The kind of experience Alston is referring to is exemplified in the following report:

Then, in a very gentle and gradual way, with no shock at all, it began to dawn on me that I was not alone in the room. Someone else was there, located fairly precisely about two yards to my right front. Yet there was no sort of sensory hallucination. I neither saw him nor heard him in any sense of the word 'see' and 'hear', but there he was; I had no doubt about it. He seemed to be very good and very wise, full of sympathetic understanding.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 224.

¹⁰² Alston, *Perceiving God*, 225.

¹⁰³ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 185.

¹⁰⁴ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 5.

¹⁰⁵ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 21.

¹⁰⁶ Timothy Beasworth, *A Sense of Presence* reprinted in Alston, *Perceiving God*, 17.

Alston characterizes direct religious perception as something (taken by the subject to be God) presenting itself to their awareness in a similar way physical objects present themselves to our visual awareness.¹⁰⁷ This contrasts with indirect experience, in which one takes something as a sign or indication of X, but does not see X itself.¹⁰⁸ Alston also characterizes testimonies of mystics who perceive the presence of God in the background of their everyday experience as direct experiences: “God surrounds me like the physical atmosphere. He is closer to me than my own breath. In him... I live and move and have my being.”¹⁰⁹ These kind of experiences form the basis for Alston’s argument.

One criticism of Alston’s method is that he begins with the assumption that God (purportedly) can be experienced directly and simply, as a presentation to our awareness. The objection is that because these direct experiences (purportedly) of God involve interpretation on the part of the subject, they are structurally different from SP (sense perception) and thus the epistemic similarity breaks down. I contend that Alston’s argument from structural similarity works, not because we can experience God directly and free of interpretation the way we see physical objects in SP, as Alston seems to suppose, but because *neither* SP nor CMP (Christian mystical perceptual practice) involve interpretation-free perceptions. The integration of tacit clues brings us to reality in a similar way in SP and CMP. Polanyi’s epistemology and Alston’s project can be reconciled in the insight that even direct sense perception—sights, sounds, and tastes—necessarily involves interpretation and dwelling in tacit background commitments. Have you ever grabbed the wrong glass at breakfast and tasted the tang of orange juice when you were expecting milk? The sensation is not the same as drinking orange juice within the framework of past orange juice experiences. Our tacitly held categories aid in our recognition of objects, and

¹⁰⁷ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 21.

¹⁰⁸ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 21.

¹⁰⁹ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 32.

imagination fills in the gaps in our perception. That sense perception (SP) is a kind of tacit integration establishes the structural similarity between SP and what Alston calls direct perception of God. Alston's project adds to a Polanyian understanding of religious knowledge by highlighting the epistemic importance of (purported) presentations of God's presence that add to our (presumed) knowledge of God.

For Alston, if God appears to me as loving or just, then that will contribute to a *prima facie* justification that God is loving or just *provided* that the Christian doxastic practice is reliable.¹¹⁰ But what reason do we have to suppose that it is reliable? One key point of Alston's argument is that because arguments to show both SP and CMP to be reliable do not escape what he terms "epistemic circularity," justification for them cannot be in the form of explicit argument.¹¹¹ Alston points out that in order to offer an argument for the reliability of sense perception, we must either use sense perception as the source of our premises, or else get our premises from some other sources we could only trust if we already knew sense perception to be reliable.¹¹² Epistemic circularity occurs when the commitment to the conclusion—namely, that SP is reliable—is assumed in order to be justified in holding the premises to be true.¹¹³ In his book, Alston enumerates all the major arguments for SP's reliability and shows how epistemic circularity occurs in each. Under the constraints of space, I will assume without further evidence that this is the case. We will also take it for granted that CMP fares no better; like SP it can be strongly supported only with circularity.¹¹⁴

Is it possible to escape from this epistemic cul-de-sac? Alston writes that since epistemic circularity cannot be avoided, we must bite the bullet and conclude that "there is no appeal

¹¹⁰ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 94.

¹¹¹ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 103.

¹¹² Alston, *Perceiving God*, 108.

¹¹³ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 108.

¹¹⁴ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 143.

beyond the practices we find firmly established, psychologically and socially.”¹¹⁵ By “doxastic practice,” Alston refers to the “exercise of a system or constellation of belief-forming habits or mechanisms, each realizing a function that yields beliefs with a certain kind of content from inputs of a certain type.”¹¹⁶ An example could be the simple input of specific sensory qualia and the output belief that Suzie Jones stands before you.¹¹⁷ Inferences we draw from other beliefs also qualify the outputs of a doxastic practices, as do the beliefs formed from memory inputs. Wittgenstein saw that our doxastic practices are in an important sense foundational. He wrote, “It is so difficult to find the beginning. Or, better: it is difficult to begin at the beginning. And not try to go further back.”¹¹⁸ For Wittgenstein we must begin with our forms of life. As Wittgenstein points out, our practices underlie “all questions and all thinking”—SP, memory, and rational intuition are all inextricably linked.¹¹⁹

Although we have no appeal beyond the practices we find unavoidable, we do have epistemically circular but non-trivial means of evaluating our belief forming practices.¹²⁰ For instance, a functioning doxastic practice must have what Alston terms an overrider system. The prima facie justification that doxastic practices provide only holds if a backlog of other justified beliefs and procedures can be called on to show a particular belief to be false (a rebutter) or show the belief to have been formed in unfavorable circumstances.¹²¹ The sense report that someone saw someone walk through walls or defy gravity would be rebutted by the cumulative sensory evidence that people cannot do that. Similarly, such a report would be undermined if I knew the subject was on LSD at the time or watching a magician’s illusions at a show. Within CMP, one

¹¹⁵ Alston *Perceiving God*, 149.

¹¹⁶ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 155.

¹¹⁷ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 155.

¹¹⁸ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §471.

¹¹⁹ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §415; Alston, *Perceiving God*, 155.

¹²⁰ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 175.

¹²¹ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 158.

who reports experiencing God as a liar would find their experience rebutted against the constellation of religious experiences and background beliefs of CMP.

Alston offers criteria by which we can judge if a doxastic practice is rationally engaged in and yields justified beliefs: it must be (1) socially established, (2) internally consistent (3) consistent with other firmly established doxastic practices and (4) it exhibits significant self support.¹²² A socially established practice that has persisted over generations has at least earned the right to be considered seriously in ways that a novel doxastic practice—say, predicting the future by studying the remains of smashed watermelons, does not.¹²³ For Alston, it is reasonable to suppose that a practice that did not put people in touch with at least some aspects of reality would not be continually accepted by large portions of the population.¹²⁴ We should only offer initial, ungrounded credence to socially established practices.¹²⁵ Any new practice will have to prove itself.

The *prima facie* justification of beliefs provided by established doxastic practices can be overridden if it *persistently* yields contradictory results. That practices like SP and memory do sometimes yield contradictions is clear: witnesses to crimes or accidents often offer conflicting testimony, memories often do not align, and scientists draw different conclusions from the same data.¹²⁶ Nonetheless, we consider these practices to retain their *prima facie* justificatory force. Consistency between doxastic practices is also necessary. It is in this way that historically established practices, like consulting the oracle at Delphi, were ruled out by the more established SP.¹²⁷ Whether SP rules out CMP will be considered below.

¹²² Alston, *Perceiving God*, 175.

¹²³ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 170.

¹²⁴ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 170.

¹²⁵ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 170.

¹²⁶ Alston *Perceiving God*, 170.

¹²⁷ Alston *Perceiving God*, 172.

Finally, a doxastic practice must have what Alston calls significant self support. SP, for instance, is significantly self-supported because it fulfills its basic aim and function: providing us with a “map” of our physical and social environment.¹²⁸ We can make predictions that (by engaging in SP) we know turn out to be correct, offering us some mastery of our environment.¹²⁹ Through sense experience, we can offer a detailed account of how our senses operate and why they sometimes go wrong.¹³⁰ Alston points out that although this support is epistemically circular, it is by no means trivial.

We are now equipped to turn to the core of Alston’s argument: because CMP is a socially established doxastic practice that has an overrider system, is internally consistent, does not significantly conflict with our firmly established doxastic practices, and has significant self support, it is rationally engaged in and its outputs are *prima facie* justified.¹³¹ If CMP cannot be shown to be discredited or unreliable, then the *prima facie* justification stands and we may regard it as reliable in belief formation.¹³² In what follows, I will present Alston’s defense of CMP as having the relevant features of a rationally engaged in doxastic practice.

As with SP, CMP is set within a community where one learns to interact with the environment with the help of socially established rules and oversight.¹³³ That CMP is a firmly socially established practice seems clear. I will not here try to delineate how many participants a practice needs to qualify as ‘socially established,’ but it seems intuitive that the less a practice is socially established, the smaller its epistemic claim.

Consider CMP’s overrider system. In contrast to CMP, in SP observers of precisely the

¹²⁸ Alston *Perceiving God*, 250.

¹²⁹ Alston *Perceiving God*, 173.

¹³⁰ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 173.

¹³¹ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 194.

¹³² Alston, *Perceiving God*, 194.

¹³³ Alston *Perceiving God*, 187.

same phenomena can serve as a check to accuracy. The perceptions of CMP are individual—no one else can experience exactly what the mystic sees. Nonetheless, CMP is in a position to make a judgment whether any direct experience of God aligns with the totality of Christian experience and doctrine. A report that God told me to kill all phenomenologists would be rebutted. Even an experience consistent with the experience of the Christian community could be *undermined*. The Catholic mystical tradition stresses that veridical experiences of God will result in strengthening one’s moral and spiritual development.¹³⁴ In any Christian tradition, purported experiences of God will be undermined by a life lived inconsistently with Jesus’ teaching.¹³⁵ Of course, CMP leaves open the possibility of veridical transformational experiences by those previously uncommitted to religious practices, but any claim to *continual* experiences of God would have to be supported by a life lived consistent with Christian teaching.

A full explanation of CMP’s internal constancy will not be attempted here, but one must consider the complicated issue of differing traditions within Christianity. Different sects take different parts of Christianity to be central and others peripheral, and mystical perceptions do vary. In SP we do not find the same diversity of perception, although a marine sniper’s eyes, a classical conductor’s ears, or a wine-taster’s sense of taste and smell will perceive certain things more acutely than the rest of us. Alston’s answer is to inscribe a kind of boundary between what is “unmistakably in the Christian tradition” and what in a sense “makes a mockery” of that tradition.¹³⁶ Of course, such a line is not precise, but for Alston, the traditional Catholic, Orthodox, and the more conservative strands of the Protestant Church certainly count.¹³⁷ Within this circle, of course there will be contradictory outputs, but SP shares this feature as well. The

¹³⁴ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 194.

¹³⁵ Jesus claimed purity of heart was a precondition for seeing God (Matthew 5:8).

¹³⁶ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 193.

¹³⁷ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 194.

totality of religious experience, however, offers a clear and significant standard against which to judge individual experience; demanding complete consistency is too stringent.

If CMP conflicts with the more established SP, it should be abandoned. Possible areas of conflict include the possibility of miracles, the origin of the material universe, and methodological differences. Smuggled into the claim that science contradicts religion are a set of *values* about what is sensible, coherent, and consistent, and what is bizarre or ‘spooky’ that many (but not all) scientists and academics happen to have. To be as sure of these values as we are about some scientific facts is a mistake. Alston points out that the proper assumption of scientific inquiry is that natural events have natural causes.¹³⁸ This assumption holds within the proper arena for scientific inquiry—the physical universe. Any religious scientist holds this assumption as she does the work of science. No religious scientist would claim, for instance, that the Angel of Death killed her cell culture. Alston points out that the conflict with religion occurs when naturalism extends the proper assumption of scientific inquiry—that natural events have natural causes—into the same territory occupied by religion.¹³⁹ Why should this assumption for scientific inquiry become a *metaphysical* maxim? It is supposed that the scientific viewpoint includes assuming that the existence of the universe has a naturalistic explanation. This, however, is extending the proper assumption of science too far. Scientific inquiry cannot step outside of nature and answer questions about the origin of the string of natural causes it assumes. The assumptions proper for one area of study may not be the case for another, and science is not capable of answering all the questions we might have. Alston points out that science and religion have different basic subject matters, and it is proper for them to start with different

¹³⁸ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 242.

¹³⁹ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 245.

assumptions.¹⁴⁰

Do the accepted facts of science contradict religious belief? The affirmation of miracles is not contradicted by the physical laws because any meaningful test must recreate initial conditions of the event in question, and Jesus of Nazareth is not available for clinical trials. If anything, the fact that you could never transmute water into wine in a laboratory is good news for Christianity. If *anyone* could perform such a feat, Jesus' claims to be God would collapse into a claim to be a very skilled chemist, and Christianity would lose religious import. To deny the *possibility* of miracles is outside of the purview of science because the existence an omnipotent God to perform them is not a scientific question.

Finally, CMP exhibits the crucial aspect of significant self support. Alston points out that SP, for instance, is significantly self-supported because it fulfills its basic aim and function: providing us with a “map” of our physical and social environment. CMP, in contrast, is significantly supported because it fills *its* aim and function—guiding us through our spiritual environment.¹⁴¹ Although this support for SP and CMP is epistemically circular, as Alston points out, it is by no means trivial.¹⁴² Through CMP, we get a picture of the nature of God and His purposes, plans, and requirements from us.

CMP is self-supported by the claim that lives are transformed when people come in contact with the (supposed) spiritual realities of Christianity. Religious faith provides the power to break free of the tangled web of our own selfish desires and live anew. It is claimed that Christian faith gives us the power to break free because it offers a deeper joy and sweeter delight of abiding in the love of Christ, like fruit on the vine. Whatever the spiritual realities involved, people do in fact find religion and the answers it provides helpful and transformative for their

¹⁴⁰ Alston *Perceiving God*, 242.

¹⁴¹ Alston *Perceiving God*, 250.

¹⁴² Alston, *Perceiving God*, 173.

actual lives. This feature is what makes naturalistic pragmatists like Bagger and Hook advocate for a place for religion in society. In contrast, Bertrand Russell would have criticized CMP's self-support: "there was the Inquisition, with all its tortures; there were millions of unfortunate women burned as witches; and there was every kind of cruelty... in the name of religion."¹⁴³ The witch hunt numbers are closer to fifty thousand, but Russell has a point.¹⁴⁴ Not everything done in the name of Christ supports his claims. And yet, I contend that greater cruelty has been perpetrated in the name of scientific eugenics than in the name of Christ, and we do not for that reason suppose that the whole practice of science or genetics is bereft of self-support. We admit rather that the eugenics scientists and witch-hunters were mistaken and did not truly understand their respective practices. Christianity has proven compelling to diverse cultures and times because it actually helps people. Perhaps examples will best illuminate my foregoing generalizations about significant self-support.

Consider Louis Zamperini. A celebrated Olympian, Zamperini spent the duration of the second world war in Japanese prison camps. Captured POWs faced brutal treatment at the hands of the Japanese guards, the worst of whom was Mutsuhiro Watanabe, known as "the Bird." Threatened, the Bird singled the spirited Olympian out. The details of the physical, psychological, and sexual torture Zamperini experienced at the hands of the Bird will not here be put into writing. After the war, Zamperini returned to the states and married, while the Bird eluded prosecution as a war criminal. The Bird haunted Louis. He would dream of squeezing the life out of the Bird, only to awake to find his wife's neck between his fingers. He turned to alcohol to drown his past. He and his wife separated, and Louis became convinced that to free himself, he would have to hunt down the Bird and kill him. Revenge consumed his thoughts by

¹⁴³ Bertrand Russell, "Why I am not a Christian," Drew University, <http://www.users.drew.edu/~jlenz/whynot.html>.1.

¹⁴⁴ Brian Levak, *The Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe*,

day and his dreams by night. In 1949, his wife Cynthia convinced him to attend the meeting of a young evangelist named Billy Graham. He left that tent in L.A. a changed man. He wrote later in a letter of forgiveness to the Bird, “The post-war nightmares caused my life to crumble, but thanks to a confrontation with God through the evangelist Billy Graham, I committed my life to Christ. Love has replaced the hate I had for you.”¹⁴⁵ The Bird no longer haunted his dreams. Louis poured his alcohol down the sink, reunited with his wife, and began life anew.

In Bob Bevington’s book, *Red Like Blood*, he describes how he cheated on his wife Rita and left her for another woman. Soon after, Rita was struck with cancer. She was left alone with nothing but bitterness towards the people who she saw as taking everything from her. Bob wrote the book to show how the grace of God flows through the cracks in the lives of sinners. He claims that Christ intervened in their lives, and through His grace they found grace and forgiveness for one another. Bob, his wife, and his ex-wife sit together at the church I interned at last summer. They make an odd sight indeed.¹⁴⁶

If you are unfamiliar with the Christian concepts of sin, grace, and redemption, perhaps the examples above help make the terms clearer. My contention here is not that changed lives function as premises to an *argument*. Hand-picked vignettes do not function that way. The philosophical contention is that such transformative experiences of Christianity are far more prevalent than what Russell sees as Christianity’s main contribution: inquisitions, witch hunts, stymied progress, and cruelty. The prevalence of such experiences highlight what Alston calls significant self-support for the CMP doxastic practice. Such transformations reinforce Christian doctrine as lived examples of the theology and help validate our tacit knowledge of God. They comprise the fulfillment of the functional purpose of mapping our divine environment.

¹⁴⁵ Laura Hillenbrand, *Unbroken* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 397.

¹⁴⁶ Bob Bevington and Joe Coffey, *Red like Blood* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2011), 185

Would, for example, Zamperini's transformational experience count as a veridical perception of God under Alston's conception of CMP? Russell would probably hold to some critical assumptions and point out that evidence for such a fantastic claim is lacking. Polanyi shows how it might be veridical. Polanyi's answer to the question of other minds is that tacit clues available in SP point us to the joint comprehension of a real, active, unique center of thought existing in the bodies of others.¹⁴⁷ In an analogous way, tacit clues can point us to the joint comprehension of a divine mind. Alston focuses on perceptions of God that are phenomenologically similar to sense perception to preserve the comparison between CMP and SP, but I contend that Polanyi's understanding of personal knowledge opens the way for experiences like Zamperini's to be included as an input for CMP from which beliefs about God could be formed.

Even if CMP has the relevant qualities of a reliable belief forming practice—including significant self-support—we must consider some disanalogies between SP and CMP before the prima facie justification given to SP is extended to CMP. One could, for instance, explain religious transformation in social and psychological terms, in which a false perception of God results in a kind of placebo effect. Perhaps the delusion of being forgiven and freed from guilt results in some ethically fruitful results. Alston argues that such reductive appeals to psychology are “highly speculative and, at best, sketchily supported by the evidence.” As mystical experiences are not induced at the will of the researcher, empirical testing is difficult.¹⁴⁸ He notes that most explanations cluster around hidden psychological mechanisms that themselves resist measurement—repression, regression, and defense mechanisms.¹⁴⁹ Even if psychology and sociology *could* give a full account of religious experience and behavior, it

¹⁴⁷ Polanyi, *Meaning*, 48.

¹⁴⁸ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 230.

¹⁴⁹ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 230.

would not explain away the presence of a divine reality. Imagine if sociologists and psychologists were to study the scientific community—bracketing whether scientific claims carried any truth value—and examined grant writing, getting published in journals, experimentation, and conferences from a sociological and psychological perspective. They would probably produce a compelling sociological account of *why* scientists do what they do. This sociological account—even a complete one—would not “explain away” the reliability of the scientific practice. Since Alston’s writing, Evan Fales has put forward an explanation of mystical perception as a kind of social control—marginalized people use mystical perception to gain an upper hand in their communities.¹⁵⁰ Suppose Fales is right. Scientists also use their insights to gain an upper hand—competition for grant money and tenure is fierce. Should we dismiss either inquiry as *nothing but* bald-faced scrambling for an advantage? After a sociological account, the reality of the subject of inquiry is a further question.

Alston is not unaware of the obvious differences between SP and CMP, but argues that to require that CMP have all the features of SP is unreasonable given CMP’s subject matter. Unlike SP which is universally engaged in, CMP is distributed among relatively few.¹⁵¹ Even within Christianity, the experiences Alston categorizes as direct perception of God are rare. Alston’s response is that it is not worrisome that some would have access to divine reality and not others. He points out that the relatively small number of wine-tasters or x-ray interpreters does not significantly diminish the reliability of those perceptual practices.¹⁵² To demand that CMP be universally engaged in is to employ what he terms epistemic imperialism—unwarrantedly taking features of one practice as necessary for others. For instance, sense perception is constant and

¹⁵⁰ Evan Fales, "Scientific Explanations of Mystical Experiences, Part I: The Case of St. Teresa," *Religious Studies* 32, no. 2 (June 1996): 153, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20019807>.153.

¹⁵¹ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 197.

¹⁵² Alston, *Perceiving God*, 198.

unavoidable, while mystical perception is fleeting and intermittent, but given CMP's subject matter, requiring constant perception is unreasonable.¹⁵³

There is significantly more interpersonal agreement in SP than in CMP. In SP, people can independently support each other in the same perception: we all affirm that we see that elephant. CMP, in contrast, is an individual affair. For this reason, it is alleged that CMP lacks the effective overrider system that SP has.¹⁵⁴ Yet this is another case of epistemic imperialism. CMP's overrider system weighs the reports of past experiences against background beliefs, and should not be expected to perform concurrent checks the way we do in SP. These features *do* render CMP less epistemically viable compared to SP. However, because it retains the relevant features of a socially established doxastic practice and is not shown to be unreliable, it is rational to engage in and its outputs are *prima facie* justified.

Ulf Zackariasson criticizes Alston's argument by claiming that while CMP and MP may have a structural similarity, they differ functionally in an important way, rendering any comparison between them untenable.¹⁵⁵ Zackariasson points out that for SP, we can always learn that an object did not have the properties we originally thought it had.¹⁵⁶ We see our mistakes about physical reality and correct them, but CMP's doctrine-based overrider system precludes such corrections.¹⁵⁷ Any experience that does not accord with the established image of God will be thrown out as not veridical. Thus, any mystical experience that gets admitted as veridical must affirm the Christian notions about God already held. SP can force us to revise our beliefs in ways CMP simply cannot.¹⁵⁸ Alston's answers the charge that CMP is not a source of new information

¹⁵³ Alston *Perceiving God*, 208.

¹⁵⁴ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 209.

¹⁵⁵ Ulf Zackariasson, "A Problem with Alston's Indirect Analogy-Argument from Religious Experience," *Religious Studies* 42, no. 3 (September 2006): 335, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20008658>.

¹⁵⁶ Ulf Zackariasson, "A Problem with Alston's Indirect Analogy-Argument from Religious Experience," 334

¹⁵⁷ Ulf Zackariasson, "A Problem with Alston's Indirect Analogy-Argument from Religious Experience," 334

¹⁵⁸ Ulf Zackariasson, "A Problem with Alston's Indirect Analogy-Argument from Religious Experience," 334.

by pointing out that some experiences involve the subject's present relationship to God, which cannot be a part of the background beliefs.¹⁵⁹ An experience in which a subject feels that God is calling him leave a particular practice of sin behind would qualify as new information. Alston also notes that CMP can add to a believer's prior stock of beliefs or update what he already knows.¹⁶⁰ Zackariasson, however, is concerned about the impossibility of any change or correction in doctrine in CMP as we see in SP. In SP, we can in principle find out that we were wrong to judge Stella as a mean person, but it is impossible even in principle to find out that we were wrong about God being loving.¹⁶¹

There are two responses to Zackariasson's objection. First, the corollary in SP to finding out that God is not loving would be more akin to finding out that physical objects do not take up space—what Descartes called extension. It is misleading to compare CMP beliefs about God to SP beliefs about Stella. God plays a more foundational role for CMP than Stella does for SP. Also, if Stella had been perceived for thousands of years, we would, as with our beliefs about God, not expect to find suddenly that we were mistaken all along in our beliefs about Stella. It seems in principle impossible to for subjects using SP to deny that physical objects take up space. It seems impossible to perceive that physical objects do not exist. Both SP and CMP contain unshakeable, unalterable doctrines. Secondly, Christian tradition claims that radical paradigm shifts in our understanding of God have in fact happened in redemptive history, in which mystical perception played a role. Moses' perceptions of God, for instance, added new information to the Jewish people's Abrahamic understanding of God. Jesus introduced a new paradigm through which to understand the Old Testament prophets while retaining the basic data of their perceptions. In a similar manner, in SP the new paradigm of relativity retained the basic

¹⁵⁹ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 206.

¹⁶⁰ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 206.

¹⁶¹ Ulf Zackariasson, "A Problem with Alston's Indirect Analogy-Argument from Religious Experience," 334.

data gathered in the era of Newtonian physics, but interpreted that data in a new, richer way. CMP resists paradigm shifts because Jesus' words and the writings of his disciples will always take precedence over contemporary perception, but a new paradigm shifts are possible—one may, after all, occur when (and if) Jesus returns. To claim that in order to be epistemically justified, CMP must involve paradigm shifts at a similar rate as SP is to commit what Alston would call epistemic imperialism—unwarrantedly taking features of one practice as necessary for others. If CMP *did* continually offer new doctrines and reject former ones as mistakes, these consistency issues, considering CMP's subject matter, would render it unreliable as a doxastic practice.

The most significant objection to CMP's reliability is the existence of many other socially established mystical practices whose outputs contradict CMP. Indeed, one could make a very similar case as the one presented for a Muslim or Hindu mystical practice. If there are multiple socially established mystical practices with contradictory outputs, what reason do we have to suppose any of them reliable? Alston points out there are two ways to understand the reason behind the multiplicity of mystical practices.¹⁶² One option is that no divine reality exists at all; the mystical practices are inconsistent because they are all products of different cultures, social pressures, and psychological needs. Still another is that some realms of reality that are difficult for us to discern even if some perception of it is veridical. Alston observes that the more difficult a task, the more varied are the methods employed to solve it.¹⁶³ The more complex a mathematical problem, the more ways there are to attempt an answer. Perhaps it is not surprising that there is more than one way of trying to understand deep reality.

Polanyi's concept of connoisseurship may offer reason for the inconsistency of mystical

¹⁶² Alston *Perceiving God*, 267.

¹⁶³ Alston *Perceiving God*, 268.

practices. He points out that an expert wine-taster or interpreter of x-rays cannot gain the skills of these perceptual practices by precept; they must be learned through experience under the guidance of a master.¹⁶⁴ In a similar way, it is possible that only one perceptual practice teaches skills necessary to approach deep reality in a fully reliable manner. Other practices may be bumping into ultimate reality, but in inferior ways.

The difficulty of multiple MP's can be put another way. Even if one of the MP's does bring us closer to ultimate reality, we have, on the face of it, no independent reasons to suppose that CMP is the one.¹⁶⁵ Of course, *within* CMP we find reasons to suppose it is more reliable, but other MP's will share this feature as well. Given a lack of reasons to prefer one MP over another, how can it be rational to engage in any of them? With SP, in contrast, we are not presented with such a choice. Alston's response to this difficulty is to point out that we have no idea of what a non-circular proof of CMP would even look like, even if it were reliable, so the absence of such evidence is not as problematic as intra-practice contradictions would be.¹⁶⁶ Given no reason to give up the doxastic practices we find ourselves committed to, the rational choice is to continue engaging in them.

Alston points out that the diversity of mystical practices does in fact reduce CMP's status as a rationally engaged doxastic practice, but notes that it is unclear to what extent it is reduced.¹⁶⁷ I think our rational intuitions will differ on this point. Gale, a critic of Alston, points out that throughout his argument, Alston has to concede that the epistemic justification SP enjoys does not extend fully to CMP because it lacks SP's level of intersubjective agreement and

¹⁶⁴ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 54

¹⁶⁵ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 269.

¹⁶⁶ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 272.

¹⁶⁷ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 275.

prediction tests for checking up on claims.¹⁶⁸ Alston also admits that “CMP and other forms of MP are less firmly established,” and therefore “lay claim to a weaker degree of epistemic status.”¹⁶⁹ For Gale, the holes in the ship make the argument unseaworthy. As Gale paraphrases William Alston’s concessions,

This is Captain Bill speaking. We have just hit a significant iceberg [the problem of multiple MP’s], but it is only a small one, and it has made only a small hole, and we are listing only slightly. I suggest that those morbid chaps who are singing hymns return to the gaming tables.¹⁷⁰

I contend that if a perceptual practice of direct experiences of God was the only support for religious belief, such a ship could not carry the weight entrusted to it and would indeed sink. But this is not the only support. Let us recall the argument of part three. Polanyi’s structure of personal knowledge showed how (phenomenologically different, but not structurally different) perception of God through tacit clues could make religious belief persuasive and compelling. We needed a reason, however, to suppose that those tacit integrations of divine reality were not leading us astray. Alston’s argument showed that CMP had the credentials of a rationally engaged in socially established doxastic practice, and therefore, like SP, provided *prima facie* justified outputs. This offers support to the notion of veridical tacit integrations of God. The tacit knowledge of God forms the basis from which what Alston calls direct perception (which involves tacit integrations) of Him is possible, just as *any* explicit knowledge (including scientific knowledge) is gained within a background of tacit clues. We examined the nature of CMP’s significant self-support. The map of our divine environment, so to speak, leads Christians where we want to go: to a deeper sense of meaning, joy, profundity, and ethical fruitfulness. Natural theology and apologetics—arguments that purport to support the historical claims of

¹⁶⁸ Richard Gale, “The Overall Argument of Alston’s ‘Perceiving God,’” *Religious Studies* 30, no. 2 (June 1994): 147, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20019674>.

¹⁶⁹ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 283.

¹⁷⁰ Gale, “The overall argument for Alston’s *Perceiving God*,” 147.

Christianity—also corroborate (presumed) perceptions of God by independently affirming the reality CMP’s subject matter, namely, the existence God and a divine Jesus.

In a sense, many features of the above cumulative argument for the possibility of veridical divine perception are epistemically circular. I contend, however, that this is not fatally problematic. As Jaakko Hintikka explained, “a circle of explication need not be a vicious one, provided it is wide enough to enable a logician to uncover nontrivial aspects of the structure of the concepts involved.”¹⁷¹ I think Christian practices comprise a wide enough circle, although a defense of how wide a circle need be will not be offered here. Dwelling within the socially established practices of Christianity, one finds that doctrine, the transformed way of life, and religious experience support one another in a non-trivial manner.

Part 4: The Epistemic Status of Religious Belief

In this section, I will (1) conclude that those who dwell within the practices of religion can be epistemically justified in holding religious beliefs (2) clarify some differences between the status of religious and scientific beliefs, and (3) show why understanding or accepting a religious framework requires more than mere discursive reasons.

The Apostle Paul wrote, “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then we shall see face to face.”¹⁷² To those who dwell whole-heartedly in the practices of Christianity, those tacit glimpses through the mirror are persuasive and compelling. I contend that these people are justified in making *knowledge* claims about the divine realities they claim to see and experience. In previous sections, we have seen that the practices of science and religion often pitted against

¹⁷¹ Jaakko Hintikka, "Quantifying In," in *The Intentions of Intentionality and Other New Models for Modalities* (Dordrecht, D. Reidel, 1975) : 135 fn. 41.

¹⁷² 1 Corinthians 13:12

one another are in fact partners in guilt: both involve tacit integration and the ‘messy,’ value-laden elements of the knower’s personal participation in knowledge. Of course, the claims of science can be experimentally and repeatedly verified in ways that religious knowledge cannot.

In the introduction to his *Ethics*, Aristotle remarked,

It is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs.¹⁷³

The true nature of God and Ultimate Reality we should not expect to conform to the rigors of science.

The above case is, however, based on tacit integrations not everyone makes and experiences not everyone has. Wittgenstein scholar Norman Malcolm pointed out that “by and large religion is to most university people an alien form of life. They do not participate in it and do not understand what it is all about.”¹⁷⁴ I would not expect someone committed to a naturalistic framework to be swayed by the foregoing defense of religious personal knowledge. Wittgenstein would not expect it; he wrote in his *Lecture on Religion*, “I think differently, in a different way. I say different things to myself. I have different pictures.”¹⁷⁵ The Apostle Paul would not expect it either: “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.”¹⁷⁶ And it *does* appear foolish: a man crucified by the Romans long ago claims to be the ruler of universe. Religious knowledge claims cannot be taken as epistemically authoritative for those who do not understand the practices. As Paul completes his thought, “...but to us who

¹⁷³ Aristotle, "Nicomachian Ethics," Library of Congress, <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/samples/cam032/99036947.pdf>. Book I

¹⁷⁴ Norman Malcolm, "The Groundlessness of Belief," in *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 100.

¹⁷⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Lecture on Religion," in *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), 2.

¹⁷⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:18

are being saved it is the power of God.”¹⁷⁷ Those who have felt the power of God in their own lives *are* epistemically justified in making religious knowledge claims.

Religious claims will only be convincing for those who engage in the practices. One of the differences between a physicist’s claim to have perceived the god-particle and a mystic’s claim to have perceived God is that if one accepts the existence of the Higgs-Boson particle, he can accept that fact and go on living his life, unchanged. Imagine a counter-factual, however, in which the existence of the Higgs-Boson somehow self-evidently entailed that the existential basis for everyone’s life ought to dramatically change. The physicists would find themselves under a scrutiny unheard of in the field of physics, and the existence of the Higgs-Boson would be questioned. Wittgenstein pointed out that even if the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection was as indubitable as Napoleon, it would not be enough to believe, “because the indubitability wouldn’t be enough to make me change my whole life.”¹⁷⁸ Religious claims have a unique status because they cannot be accepted the way other claims can.

Avery Dulles points out that in order to truly access a religious community’s knowledge, one must embrace the fundamental change of religious conversion, which touches a person at the deepest level.¹⁷⁹ This kind of acceptance of a new identity is not necessary to draw near to other realities like Higgs-Bosons, although becoming an expert physicist presents its own difficulties. Dulles writes, “The more completely the believer dwells in the community of faith and relies on it, the more lively will be his or her sense of the Christian faith.”¹⁸⁰ To the outsider, religious language is mere metaphor, but to one who engages in the practices, the words expressing deep realities meaningfully relate to their actual experience and

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁷⁸ Wittgenstein, “Lecture on Religion,” 3.

¹⁷⁹ Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology*, 66.

¹⁸⁰ Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology*, 66.

form of life.¹⁸¹ God is not a thing to be observed on our terms; for Dulles, we do not so much grasp the faith as allow ourselves to be grasped by it.¹⁸² To begin any inquiry, one must believe that there is something there to be discovered. In the case of religious faith, tacit intimations guide us, but to begin the journey requires what Kierkegaard recognized as a very difficult step.

Breaking into a new interpretive framework is difficult in part because, as Polanyi points out, the longer we use an interpretive framework, the more we strengthen our uncritical acceptance of it.¹⁸³ Whenever we evaluate a theory, we attend from other tacitly held theories and assumptions that we accept uncritically for the moment.¹⁸⁴ This means that judging our deeply held interpretive frameworks will be difficult. Acceptance of a framework is not arbitrary; we can determine reasons for accepting or rejecting competing interpretive frameworks. Personal judgments within the bounds of universal intent will always play a role. Avery Dulles wrote, “We can never induce people to adopt a radically new outlook by arguing with them, for argumentative debate must always be conducted within the logical framework of those we are seeking to convince.”¹⁸⁵ As Wittgenstein wrote in the same vein, “At the end of reasons comes persuasion.”¹⁸⁶ Religious transformation is more than changing the contents of one’s beliefs, but changing one’s way of being in the world. Religious claims, therefore, should also be judged on the basis of the religious form of life.

Bertrand Russell declared that he could not believe in God because there was not enough evidence.¹⁸⁷ As we have seen, Russell was looking in the wrong kind of evidence in the wrong places. Just as one will only find evidence for the Higgs-Boson

¹⁸¹ Lowney, office hours.

¹⁸² Dulles, *Craft of Theology*, 67.

¹⁸³ Polanyi, *Meaning*, 37.

¹⁸⁴ Polanyi, *Meaning*, 37.

¹⁸⁵ Dulles, “Faith Church and God: Insights from Michael Polanyi,” 543

¹⁸⁶ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 612

¹⁸⁷ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 131.

within the practices of physics, religious knowledge can only be found by personal participation within religious practices. Russell was looking for explicit, testable reasons when religious knowledge is in fact primarily tacit. Russell's critical assumptions mistakenly force a false choice between counter-critical rational apologetics and fideism.¹⁸⁸ The proper understanding of religion is through personal knowledge. As counterintuitive as it sounds, the philosophy of religion does not provide one with the best picture of religion. To judge truly, one must stop evaluating the philosophy of religion, and start on practices of religion itself.

¹⁸⁸ Dulles, *Craft of Theology*, 13

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