Faith and Epistemology:
Religious Truth Claims and Epistemic Warrant

An Invited Position Paper By

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Editor's Note: *The "Invited Position Paper" segment is a unique feature to SHERM journal where hand-selected scholars are invited to write their particular standpoint or attitude on a specific issue. While the position paper is intended to engender support for the paper's line of reasoning and overall conclusion, the paper is not intended to be a simple op-ed piece. Rather, each essay must be academic in nature by deriving its position from verifiable data and/or the author's training and experience as a scholar in their field of study.*

In this particular case, the author was asked to answer the following question:
"Can or should faith (specifically, religious faith) be considered an epistemology? If yes, what makes faith an epistemological method? If no, what epistemological methods preclude faith from being considered?"

Abstract: This essay argues for the rationality of truth claims arising from religious faith over against the contention that such claims are, at best, viewed as subjective "value" language or, at worst, strictly irrational. An argument will be offered for the epistemic warrant of faith-based claims, not for the objective veracity of the religious claims themselves.

Keywords: Religious Faith, Epistemology, Knowledge, Justified Belief

Introduction

PHILOSOPHY TOOK A DRAMATIC, but possibly at the time unnoticed, shift in emphasis in the sixteenth century. From the first glimmerings of the Enlightenment, epistemology supplanted metaphysics as the chief concern of philosophy. This, of course, had significant implications for theology. Although philosophy and theology were seen as related and equally respectable disciplines, soon even the mere articulation of religious truth claims became problematic.

The question that confronts us now is to what extent religious language has any independent transcendent referent. In other words, do religious claims really give us knowledge of anything true or real? Philosophers (of all faiths and no faith at all) have filled entire library shelves on the topic. I

am not a professional philosopher or theologian. I teach history at a small Christian liberal arts college in California. Nevertheless, I feel the challenge of epistemic justification of my own faith statements, both as an academic and as one who reads widely in the fields of philosophy, ethics and sociology. I feel the challenge to every Christian believer who strives to be both intellectually curious and intellectually honest. I am not alone in this challenge.

As an engaged non-specialist, all I can do is set up the "problem" and suggest how I have (tentatively) solved it for myself. In one sense this is a defense of religious faith as possessing knowledge of something real. In another sense, it is defense of the rationality of religious knowledge or belief. Thus, the epistemological questions that confront us now: is my "knowing" supported by evidence? What constitutes sufficient evidence? What does a rational response to evidence consist of? I will paint a somewhat broad brush—but hopefully with sufficient detail to render my position on this issue comprehensible.

The Epistemological "Problem" of Religious Truth Claims

We will be working from simple definitions of "faith" and "epistemology." Although the volitional nature of faith will form part of a possible solution to the dilemma bequeathed to us by the Enlightenment, I am primarily talking about "religious truth claims" when I use the word "faith." "Epistemology" will refer to the nature of cognitive access to these religious claims. Again, since most of these religious claims are beyond definitive resolution as to their actual referential veracity (e.g. whether God or the "transcendent" can be conclusively proven to exist as independent reality), what we are really asking is if it is rational to believe religious truth claims at all. Can we claim to actually "know" anything from our religious faith?

The Enlightenment had left us with something called the "fact-value" dichotomy.[1] Jerry Gill calls this "epistemological dualism."[2] Empirical investigation leads to knowledge about "facts," while religious or speculative language deals with values. Facts are objective, while values are subjective. Facts have an independent reality and can be known, while values, though perhaps important (even indispensable) can only be believed. Ludwig Wittgenstein noted that "in ethical and religious language we … use similes, but a simile must be a simile for something. As soon as we try to drop the

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[1] Michael W. Goheen and Craig Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 97.

[2] Jerry Gill, *The Possibility of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1971), 15.

"religious" reflection and experience are epistemologically respectable, though not strictly scientific or objective in nature.[32]

  Wood suggests that intellectual humility is a virtue to be cultivated. At the outset of this paper, I suggested that the goal is to argue for epistemic warrant in the claim that religious faith can speak to the nature of reality. The goal is not to argue for the veracity of the religious claims themselves. The postmodern turn is correct in pointing out that there is "no view from nowhere." The critique of the rationality of faith claims offered by the Enlightenment and its intellectual heirs is as culturally and even psychologically conditioned as the object of that critique The claims of logical positivists as to the nature of reality and our epistemological access to it are strong ones. But no longer can the epistemic claims of faith be summarily dismissed as containing zero merit. If intellectual humility and openness is a virtue, as I believe it is, then thoughtful religious voices and the knowledge claims made by them, deserve a seat at the table.[33]

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  [32] Cf. Jack David Eller, "The Science of Unknowable and Imaginary Things," *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 178–201, https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm. 2019.vol1.no2.04 and Thomas Burke, "Is Metaphysics a Science?," *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 252–73, https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm. 2019.vol1.no2.08.

  [33] For a different position on the subject, see Evan Fales, "Is Faith a Path to Knowledge?," *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 182–205, https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2020.vol2.no1.08.

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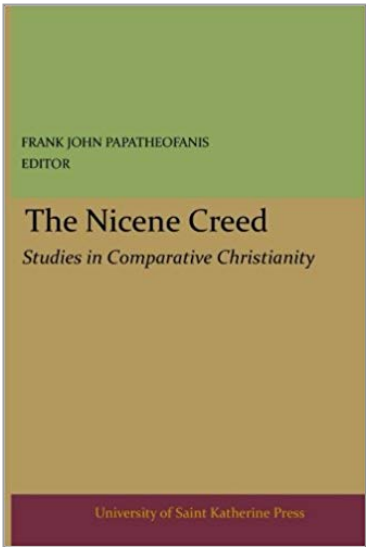
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