

# Faith and Epistemology: Religious Truth Claims and Epistemic Warrant

*An Invited Position Paper By*

Julius Gurney III,  
William Jessup University

**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.<sup>1</sup> Jerry Gill calls this “epistemological dualism.”<sup>2</sup> 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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<sup>1</sup> Michael W. Goheen and Craig Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 97.

<sup>2</sup> Jerry Gill, *The Possibility of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1971),

simile and state the facts which stand behind it, we find that there are no such facts.”<sup>3</sup> Here, religious speech is relegated to the realm of values. Values, in this sense, are not “knowable” in the same way as facts are. We see this play out today in the battle over science education in our public schools. Science deals with observable (objective and cognitively accessible) facts while religious explanations of origins belong in a humanities classroom—as they deal with subjective values.<sup>4</sup>

By the middle of the twentieth century, logical positivism (sometimes referred to as empirical positivism) seemed to restrict the rationality or the objectivity of faith language even further. Following Bertrand Russell and others, faith statements became meaningless, incomprehensible. Since only what could be empirically verifiable could be spoken of, and since religious language is inherently subjective, faith statements were dismissed as literally non-sense. They make no sense, if “sense” refers to what can be objectively proven to be true. Gill’s epistemological dualism becomes epistemological monism in the hands of the positivists. Religious views may serve pragmatic ends, and those ends may indeed be laudable, but we must not imbue them with any independent, rationally accessible “reality.” It is easy to see the epistemological dilemma this poses for the Christian, particularly the Christian scholar who desires to have a seat at the table of rational academic discourse. The seriousness by which we must take this challenge, however, is noted by Richard Swinburne when he suggests that in religious beliefs, “We may be rather more inclined to self-deception than about more mundane beliefs. We may want to believe, although we really do not, and so persuade ourselves that we do—or conversely, we may not want to believe, although we really do, and yet persuade ourselves that we do not.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Contemporary Philosophical “Solutions” to the Dilemma**

Two things have made faith language epistemologically viable again in the last few decades. First, the postmodern turn has questioned the objectivity of the empiricists. And secondly, a number of theologians and philosophers of faith have made it possible again to speak of the rationality of

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Gill, *The Possibility of Religious Knowledge*, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. David Kyle Johnson, “Identifying the Conflict between Religion and Science,” *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 122–48, <https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2020.vol2.no1.06>.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0198247257.001.0001>.

religious claims. Of course, this has never been a particular problem outside of the academy, even in an advancing secular culture. But it has seemed to be an intractable problem *within* the academy, and scholars who wish to communicate the rationality of their religious beliefs find this a welcome move.

The postmodern ethos has been judged a rather “mixed bag” among Christian apologists. It can also be argued that the discipline of philosophy has “moved on” in recent years. It is fair to say, though, that the questions that postmodernism presents are still taken seriously. Enlightenment foundationalism and David Hume’s empiricist standard for truth claims are no longer uncritically accepted by many contemporary scholars. Enlightenment (“modern”) conceptions of rationality and epistemology are routinely seen to be culturally conditioned.<sup>6</sup> Philosopher Crispin Sartwell, writing in *The Atlantic*, states this about his own atheism:

Religious people sometimes try to give proofs of the truth of their faith—Saint Thomas Aquinas famously gave five in his *Summa Theologica*. But for many people, belief comes before arguments, originating in family, social and institutional context, in desire and need. The arguments are post-hoc rationalizations. This can be true of atheism as well. For me, it’s what I grew up with. It gets by in my social world, where professions of religious faith would be considered out of place. My non-faith is fundamentally part of how I connect with others and the world.<sup>7</sup>

Jean Bethke Elshtain notes that “abstract logical processes take us only so far. If carried to an extreme, systems of thought lose connection to reality and become self-confirming.”<sup>8</sup> Logical positivism, as an academic culture, can be said to be problematically self-confirming in this sense. It stands as a postmodern truism that “there is no view from nowhere.” This is welcome news for faith language once marginalized as irrational. The concept of rationality has been rendered ambiguous, even (especially?) for those who maintain that one can only entertain rational beliefs.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds, *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Crispin Sartwell, “Irrational Atheism,” *The Atlantic*, October 11, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/10/a-leap-of-atheist-faith/381353/>.

<sup>8</sup> Luigi Giussani, *The Religious Sense* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1997), ix.

<sup>9</sup> Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, 37.

If the “situatedness” of language, conceptions of rationality and epistemological views is recognized, then it becomes possible again to argue for the epistemic warrant of religious language and faith. Promising arguments for the same have been made by Alvin Plantinga, W. Jay Wood, Wentzel van Huyssteen, Luigi Giussani, Alister McGrath, Gill, Swinburne, and others.

Plantinga stands as one of the foremost proponents of epistemic warrant for religious faith. Over against the foundationalist (and empirical) argument that belief in God is not self-evident and therefore not foundational, Plantinga counters that many propositions considered basic are not immediately self-evident to the senses. Criteria for justified belief or “proper basicity” must be arrived at “from below” rather than handed down *ex cathedra* from above.<sup>10</sup> The Christian community, for example, is responsible for its own set of criteria as to what is cognitively accessible.<sup>11</sup> Echoing arguments that others will make, Plantinga asserts that our faith-based beliefs have epistemic warrant insofar as our cognitive faculties function properly and we are functioning in an environment suitable for them.<sup>12</sup>

Giussani argues that “the method of knowing an object is dictated by the object and cannot be defined” by epistemological actors.<sup>13</sup> Faith, in other words, carries with it its own epistemic warrant. He resists accusations of fideism, however, insisting that “if we posit a concept which is not demonstrated by our integral experience ... we can pursue logical discourse ... however this is outside of reality.”<sup>14</sup> Like others, he situates “knowing” firmly in community and individual commitment. This stands counter to a positivist “ideology (which) tends to attribute an aura of redemption and salvation to methods and practices which are determined, dominated and manipulated.”<sup>15</sup> Even Immanuel Kant, notes Giussani, claimed that human reason is at times compelled to resort to principles which are not subject to any empirical test.<sup>16</sup>

Gill, drawing from J. L. Austin and the late Wittgenstein, makes a case for the legitimacy of “tacit” knowledge. He offers a challenge to the logical empiricist bias against the possibility of metaphorical language being rational, let alone true. Although he does not wish to dismiss the “factual,” cognitively

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<sup>10</sup> Plantinga and Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality*, 75.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>12</sup> W. Jay Wood, *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 172.

<sup>13</sup> Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

accessible truth cannot be restricted to “factual assertions.”<sup>17</sup> Following Michael Polanyi, Gill suggests that tacit knowledge is not only a legitimate form of knowledge but is logically prior to explicit knowledge.<sup>18</sup> He advocates a “dimensions” model of cognition, which mediates between the realms of physical, moral and personal awareness.<sup>19</sup> This tacit knowledge includes “intuitive discovery, bodily expression, holistic recognition, embodied subjectivity, and a contextual distinction between the knower and the known.”<sup>20</sup> What is the proper response to this tacit knowledge? Commitment.

Van Huyssteen argues for a postfoundational model of rationality, a model that focuses on the experiential dimension of knowing and, thus, on the experiential dimension of reality.<sup>21</sup> He argues for a critical realism which rests midway between the “insular comfort” of foundationalism and the “arbitrariness” of antifoundationalism.<sup>22</sup> A postfoundationalist model of rationality “should therefore include an interpretation of religious experience that transcends pitfalls like the kinds of dualities that would set up ‘natural’ against ‘supernatural’ and demand a reductionist choice between the two.”<sup>23</sup> Like Plantinga and Gill, van Huyssteen ties rationality to actual practice and, thus, to a postfoundationalist notion of rationality. For him, “epistemic consonance” transcends the differences of science and theology, honoring the “provisional, fallibilist” nature of knowledge while “enabling us to retain our ideals of truth, objectivity (and) rationality.” All this resulting in a “broader, richer notion of human rationality ... revealed in its distinct cognitive, evaluative and pragmatic dimensions.”<sup>24</sup>

McGrath agrees with Thomas Torrance’s contention that “theology and science share a common commitment to a realist epistemology, to which they respond in manners which are appropriate to the nature of that reality,” as well as Alasdair MacIntyre’s suggestion that all rationalities are tradition-mediated.<sup>25</sup> With John Polkinghorne, McGrath agrees that “entities are

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<sup>17</sup> Gill, *The Possibility of Religious Knowledge*, 115.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>21</sup> Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundational Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 14.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 43

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>25</sup> Alister McGrath, *A Scientific Theology*, vol. 1, *Nature* (London: T&T Clark, 2001) 76-77 and McGrath, *A Scientific Theology*, vol. 2, *Reality* (London: T&T Clark, 2002) 64.

knowable only through ways that conform to their idiosyncratic nature.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, religious language and faith assertions, according to their own proper logic, are tied to reality just like empirically verified scientific statements are.

Finally, Wood argues for “virtue epistemology.” He notes that “typically we don’t decide what to believe, but rather find ourselves believing as we do as a result of various life experiences, early training, the testimony of authorities ... social conditioning and so forth, long before we come to think critically about the sources of our beliefs.”<sup>27</sup> How do we think critically about these beliefs? Wood commends the intellectual virtues of wisdom, prudence, foresight, discernment, truthfulness, studiousness and humility.<sup>28</sup> Intellectual “vices” would include gullibility, willful naiveté, close-mindedness, intellectual dishonesty and intellectual arrogance.<sup>29</sup> For Wood, reliabilism and coherentism are, in their own way, helpful but are also insufficient for a fully robust system of epistemic justification. After all, if coherentism is sufficient, then on what grounds would anyone change their minds about anything? Since “emotions constitute a direct means by which we gain, modify and sometimes reject important beliefs,” and since “emotions enter in at virtually every phase of scientific inquiry,” then whether we are talking about religious or empirical truth claims, we must cultivate the proper intellectual “virtues.”<sup>30</sup> In Wood’s view, “virtue epistemology” is indispensable for rationally justifiable truth claims.

### **Conclusion**

The question immediately arises: Is this not all essentially “special pleading?” Are the above scholars positing extra-rational criteria for religious truth claims that would carry no epistemic warrant without them?<sup>31</sup> This is a serious question, but the arguments of these scholars (and others) do suggest a powerful counter to the tyranny of the empirical. Truth claims that arise from

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<sup>26</sup> McGrath, *A Scientific Theology*, 2:207.

<sup>27</sup> Wood, *Epistemology*, 27.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 176, 187.

<sup>31</sup> See also, Jack David Eller, “Agnomancy: Conjuring Ignorance, Sustaining Belief,” *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 150–80, <https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2020.vol2.no1.07>.

“religious” reflection and experience are epistemologically respectable, though not strictly scientific or objective in nature.<sup>32</sup>

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.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> 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.voll.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.voll.no2.08>.

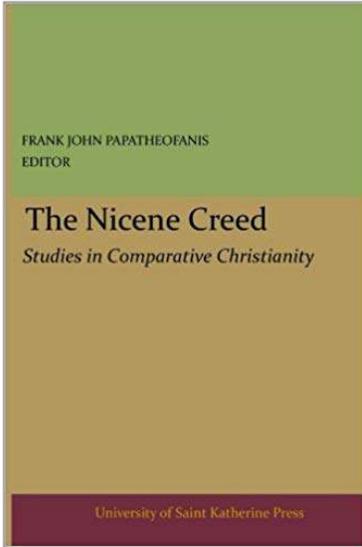
<sup>33</sup> For a different position on the subject, see Evan Fales, “Is Faith a Path to Knowledge?,” *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 182–205, <https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2020.vol2.no1.08>.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Julius (Rex) Gurney III** teaches history at William Jessup University in Rocklin, CA. He obtained his PhD from Union Theological Seminary (Richmond, VA) in 1999.

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