Belief and the Logic of Religious Commitment

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Belief and Rationality

In recent years deep questions have been raised not only about what constitutes rational justification for religious beliefs, but also about the relevance of standard notions of justification to the analysis of a believer's relation to her beliefs. Indeed, the net tendency of the Anglo-American discussion since (roughly) 1983 has been to say that religious persons can be entitled to believe a set of religious propositions, and to do so with strong subjective certainty, even while lacking the sort of intersubjective grounds that many philosophers in the past took to be necessary. One prominent expression of this tendency has been the claim that (some) religious beliefs are "properly basic," requiring no support beyond the disposition of a properly functioning mind to hold them.[1] Another is the argument that there is a "parity" among different perceptual practices, say between ocular perception (perceiving a tree) and religious perception (perceiving God).[2]

Let's use the label *Calvinists* for those who maintain that religious truths can be among the basic deliverances of reason and therefore do not require the support of more general evidential considerations.[3] In one sense, the Calvinist approach is an instance of a broader strategy, which is to shift the burden of proof from those who hold religious beliefs to those who challenge the rationality of holding them. Thus D.Z. Phillips maintains that the only reasons that are required for a religious belief are those that are called for within a particular religious language game; to criticize it "from outside" is to ignore the role of religious beliefs as expressions of a unique form of life.[4] Similarly, T.F. Torrance contends that one cannot challenge religious beliefs for failing to live up to the standards of scientific evidence, since Christians, for example, use methods and criteria appropriate to their own particular object, the self-revealing God of the Christian tradition, which is all that the concept of science requires.[5]

We might call this broader strategy the *Separatist Strategy*, since it divides the domain of religious belief off from other epistemic domains. Religious separatists may even agree with non-religious thinkers about what counts as evidence in other domains or even "in general." Yet they argue that, although

religious beliefs may well fail to meet the standards appropriate to other beliefs, they are not in any epistemic trouble, since they need conform to no epistemic standards save their own.

In contrast to these variations on the burden-of-proof strategy, one finds in the literature, a second strategy for establishing the rationality of religious belief. Thinkers who follow this strategy hold the canons of rationality (more or less) constant across disciplines and areas, instead making *what* one believes into the dependent variable. We might call this approach the *Liberal Strategy*. Its advocates are concerned about the results of science, about textual and form-critical questions in biblical scholarship, about atheism and non-Western religions as live options for our epistemic peers in the West. They generally grant that religious truth claims have become more problematic in our current historical context than they were in the past. But rather than relocating the burden of proof, liberals are ready to revise the content of Christian belief itself.[6]

Reservations about Liberalism

The revisions that characterize liberalism touch many traditional doctrines, emerging perhaps most clearly in debates about what constitutes the true historical core of Christianity. Traditionally, liberal scholars have stressed the historical-critical reasons for doubting the accuracy of biblical accounts concerning who Jesus was, what he said, and what happened to him after his arrest. In the various quests for the "historical Jesus," these scholars have often emphasized what they see as the unacceptable supernaturalism of the received accounts. In light of their negative conclusions, liberal scholars and theologians have proceeded to modify traditional conceptions of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, replacing them with new conceptions that are (they argue) more in keeping with what historical scholarship can establish about what really occurred. Generally this strategy has involved replacing supernaturalist accounts and with partially or fully naturalized ones.[7]

Among the many charges that have been leveled against liberal revisionism by conservative critics, perhaps the most common is that there is something inconsistent, if not downright dishonest, about defending a traditional faith by rejecting the tradition's account of what that faith is and means.[8] In its usual form, however, such a criticism tends to rely on an exaggeration of the tradition's unity and stability before the liberals got to it. While there is no doubt a limit beyond which a revised tradition loses all claim

to continuity, revision of one kind or another has been a pervasive feature of every religious tradition; for that reason, liberalism can probably evade the charge that its revisionism is massively inconsistent or self-defeating.

But there is another source of inconsistency that does seem to us to undermine the liberal strategy, at least insofar as it is applied to claims that trace themselves to biblical origins. Despite their skepticism about the historical reliability of the New Testament accounts, liberal scholars and theologians often display a remarkable confidence in their ability to use those same accounts as the basis of their claims about the nature of Jesus' religious consciousness and social or political sympathies.[9] But it is hard to see how such reconstructions of "what really occurred" are better attested by the (generally sparse) historical record than the traditional claims they are meant to replace. Indeed, one would think that the states of consciousness of historically remote individuals would be if anything *more difficult* to establish than what they actually did and said. Without pausing to illustrate the difficulties here, we merely record our judgment that liberal reconstructions of Christian claims are substantially weakened by a consistent application of the skeptical approaches that motivate those reconstructions in the first place.

The Implausibility of Parity Theories

A somewhat different source of weakness attends the broadly Calvinist argument that the beliefs of a religious community are rationally no worse off than scientific beliefs or, say, the deliverances of perception or common sense. This argument has been dubbed the Parity Thesis in the context of perception[10], but we shall use the term to refer to any claims to epistemic parity. The standard objection to parity claims finds one crucial difference between perception and religious experience as doxastic practices: there is almost universal agreement regarding accurate perceptions but deep disagreement about the veracity of religious experiences. Where disagreements arise in the former case, we are clear about how to resolve them; we bring in other observers or engage in additional tests to separate accurate perception from illusion. But no such mechanisms exist for sorting out the true and false claims of religious traditions.

Now there are several standard answers to this objection. For one thing, there are certainly some minimal criteria for authentic religious experience that are shared across traditions, such as a lifestyle of compassion or consistency with one's own tradition.[11] Beyond these, particular religious traditions have

also developed detailed criteria of their own for resolving disagreements. Christian communities seek to determine the authenticity of religious experiences based on faithfulness to scripture or tradition, the resulting life and practices of the experiencer, and the effect of the experiences in edifying the church.[12] Such criteria allow judgments about the veracity of religious experience to be made in a tradition-internal manner, leaving the knotty question of religious pluralism for a later treatment carried out in different terms and using a different kind of analysis.[13] Advocates argues that, as long as religious experiences occur within the context of a particular religious tradition, they take on the sort of specificity exhibited by standard doxastic practices in other areas. In such cases, it is claimed, the parallel with standard perceptual practices is sufficiently strong that one can speak of an epistemic parity between them.

But can the problem of multiple religious traditions really be treated as a subsidiary matter in this fashion (or, for that matter, can it be dismissed as a non-problem)? Or does it reveal some implausible features of the Parity Thesis—and indeed of the Calvinist/Separatist Strategy in general?[14] In one sense, it seems to us, the Calvinist response to religious plurality is logically unassailable: the epistemic situation of an individual believer is not *necessarily* changed by her awareness of competing religious traditions. But here one has to separate the logical question—Does the existence of competing religious traditions have to change one's epistemic relationship to her tradition?—from the empirical question, How might the existence of multiple live options in fact alter the epistemic situation for actual religious persons?

There were epochs in the past in which cultures were sharply divided, such that the religious beliefs and practices of others stood at a clear epistemic distance from one's own. In such circumstances, the deliverances of one's community could assume the status of universal experience. But the day of hermetically sealed cultures is long gone, at least in most of the developed West.[15] For a significant proportion of Europeans and Americans today, the presence of other options for belief—whether competing religious traditions or non-religious worldviews—informs and influences their own religious beliefs. One does not have to be a skeptic or an agnostic in order to feel the pressure of such alternatives.[16]

Consider, then, an individual who *is* convinced that other religious traditions (or atheism) represent live options.[17] She sees herself, let us suppose, as a member of a multi-religious society, in a world of increasing interdependence. Although she recognizes the particularity of the Christian tradition, she also sees herself as inhabiting an intellectual world characterized (among other things) by religious pluralism

and by a certain rational ascendancy of scientific explanation. Religious propositions, for her, are not fully isolated from this context; they are not, for example, basic givens of her experience.[18] Because she shares an intellectual context with others in her culture, she also has reason to accept, to some significant degree, the theories of error and other "defeaters" presented by alternative views. Thus, for example, when psychologists of religion offer a naturalistic explanation of religious experience, their account becomes a serious contender for her (whether or not she finally finds it convincing). And if such alternatives *are* live options, it will take more than the logical possibility that they are wrong to overcome them.

Of course there may be, and no doubt are, individuals who are content to respond to the various worries about Christian theism by appealing to their religious experience, or by using arguments aimed at undermining the objections by modal means alone ("it's logically possible that Christian claim S is true, and that's all we need to make belief permissible"). We will be satisfied if we have established the point that, *at least for many with religious interests and even religious commitment*, such arguments are not sufficient (or even plausible). There are many persons for whom the Holocaust raises serious questions about whether God acts providentially, as the New Testament claims; for whom the emergence and death of countless species over millions of years raises questions about God's creative interest in each human being; for whom it does matter that the New Testament writings seem to rely on techniques of literary invention that make it difficult to discern which passages are historical and which are instances of allegory or "midrash"; for whom the existence of men and women of equal intelligence and integrity in other cultures who hold diverging beliefs based on *their* religious experience suggests that the move from experience to belief is somewhat more difficult than the Calvinist supposes.

The Possibilist Strategy

Despite their differences in other respects, the various strategies that we have bringing together under the broad terms "Calvinist" and "liberal" share a common assumption. They both assume that a successful defense of religious practice is a defense that establishes that rationality of religious *belief*.

There is, however, a third approach, albeit one that seems to have been overlooked in the literature. Like the Calvinist Strategy, this approach holds the cognitive content of Christianity (more or less) constant, and like the Liberal Strategy it refuses to dissociate religious attitudes fully from the canons of

rationality that pertain to doxastic attitudes in other areas of experience. Yet it also realizes that *something* has to give. According to this strategy, which it is our purpose here to propose and explore, what should give is not the content of one's religious tradition but rather the nature of one's doxastic attitude toward that content. What should give, in short, is (actual) belief.

Suppose, then, we take doxastic attitude itself not as a given but as a dependent variable. Note that the range of possible doxastic attitudes runs along a sort of continuum. Consider these five:

(1) S claims that (she knows that) Christian truth claims are knowledge, and she knows what
   objectively warrants them as such;

(2) S claims that Christian truth claims are warranted;

(3) S believes them to be true, but she doesn't know that they are;

(4) S believes them to be possibly true;

(5) S disbelieves them.

Of course, one can continue on down the epistemic scale from there: S disbelieves them with increasing strength, to the limit case of being absolutely certain that they are false. Note that in speaking of degrees of belief we assume a perspective similar to Carnap's "credence function" $d(p)$, where d is a number between 0 (certainty of falsehood) and 1 (certainty of truth).[19]

The first three options are already well represented in the literature, and few would deny that each of them represents a religiously acceptable alternative. What has been neglected, once again, is the religious status of option (4), where the agent stops short of fully and actually believing a claim that nevertheless governs her religious practice. In our view, a consideration of option (4) suggests a more promising approach than either Calvinism or liberalism to the epistemological predicament currently facing religious—and especially Christian—traditions. We will call this approach *the Possibilist Strategy*.

Of course, this option only becomes genuinely interesting if one assumes that theistic (or: specifically Christian) apologetics fails. In what follows we thus assume that the apologetic arguments—proofs for the existence of God, or arguments from moral intuitions, or evidence of God's revelation in Christ, or apologetics based on evidence that God raised Jesus from the dead—are not sufficient to establish that Christian belief is rationally indicated.[20] Now we acknowledge with the Calvinists—and against the liberals—that the failure of apologetics doesn't mean that a religious person is

therefore *obligated* to withhold belief. W. K. Clifford was mistaken in his oft-cited argument that agents have an obligation never to believe anything on less-than-sufficient evidence.[21] The agent's task is not to admit beliefs onto her doxastic stage one by one as they prove themselves; rather, agents find themselves already holding a vast, complex (and often inconsistent) set of beliefs and convictions.[22] Hence if the individual finds that religious convictions persist despite the failure of apologetics, she is not thereby obliged to jettison them. Her disposition to believe might be sufficient to cause belief ("I just can't help it; when I see those stained glass windows I just can't believe it's false"); and it is not clear that she breaks any epistemic obligations by believing.

In the case we imagine, however, *the agent herself* does not believe that she has sufficient reasons for belief. She may realize that she "likes" Christian practice; that she finds it psychologically comforting, morally inspiring, or aesthetically pleasing. But she is not persuaded that she has *reasons* for belief that go beyond such influences.

Moreover, in saying that the agent lacks (what she takes to be) sufficient reasons for belief, we do not mean merely that she lacks sufficient reasons that would count as such for others. As we have just seen, a religious person could concede that she lacked intersubjectively compelling reasons and yet still insist that she possessed private or subjective reasons for her religious claims. She might speak of her religious experiences—say, her sense of encountering God in the mass or worship service, or her sense when praying of the presence and love of God—as subjective reasons for her belief in the existence of God. Let us call this response a *subjective apologetic*. A subjective apologetic is present when one uses subjective experiences of this sort as a reason for maintaining strong religious beliefs in the absence of intersubjective reasons. Clearly such reasons may be immensely forceful for the agent, influencing her degree of conviction. The question, therefore, is not whether the factors in question are "intersubjective" reasons or "private" reasons (e.g., formal apologetic arguments or instances of subjective religious experience), but rather whether the agent herself takes these factors to be sufficient reasons for actual belief.

At this point, we could easily become enmeshed in an extended discussion of which specific propositions are and are not essential to Christian practice, and from there into a debate between those who pursue the Liberal Strategy and those who reject it. Let us attempt to bypass at least part of that debate by

formulating what might plausibly be taken as the minimal content required for a religious claim to pass as Christian. Since this will presumably be a christological assertion, we might express it as Proposition X:

Proposition X = the proposition that, at a minimum, the person and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth provide an important, and possibly unique, set of insights into the nature and purposes of the divine reality; as well as an important, and possibly unique, means of spiritual access to that reality.

There are many reasons that might cause a person not to find the available reasons sufficient to warrant actual belief in Proposition X. For instance, she might well find herself unpersuaded when the following four conditions obtain:

(a) a significant subset of her epistemic peers hold (say) not-Proposition X;

(b) they have reasons for believing not-Proposition X that are analogous to the reasons given by her religious tradition for holding Proposition X;

(c) they do so with an integrity and intellectual ability equal to her own; and

(d) no meta-perspective exists (such as an impartial group of neutral observers) for deciding between the two views.[23]

We have not argued that these four, or analogous arguments, make Christianity unjustified or obligate Christian believers to withhold belief. But we do maintain that such arguments are, for many people in contexts like our own, plausible (and for some, compelling) grounds for withholding belief. And the question then becomes, What happens when one is convinced that one lacks sufficient reasons for believing Proposition X and yet remains committed to the tradition and practice that are (in some sense) based upon it?

Christian possibilism

Clearly, a doxastic attitude would not count as a state of commitment if it were characterized merely by bored contemplation of a logical possibility (in this case, the mere possibility that Proposition X is true) or by cynical detachment from (what the agent views as) unlikely or implausible claims.[24] Instead, we will have to imagine that the religious claims in question are of immense importance to the agent; they will have to be claims that, if true, will be highly significant for her self-identity, her understanding of the world and her place in it. Among the conditions such a doxastic attitude would have to satisfy would presumably be

the following:

    (1) The question of whether claims are true preoccupies the agent and motivates her to explore lines of inquiry that might help to answer it. Possibilism requires that the agent is unable to ignore the possibility that the claims are true. She may wish or hope that they be true. But one can also imagine cases where she is profoundly affected in other ways—perhaps "haunted"—by the possibility of their being true.

    (2) She is prepared to act on this possibility even in an epistemic situation in which she does not possess what (she takes to be) sufficient reasons for actual belief.

As far back as Locke, epistemologists have recognized that a theory of belief, and thus of *warranted* belief, must do justice to the differences in degrees of belief.[25] Plantinga offers the following formulation: "Say that a belief of yours is a *partial* belief if you accept it to some degree or other; partial beliefs include those you hold most firmly together with all those which you accept to some degree or other, no matter how small. (Thus the denial of one of your partial beliefs is one of your partial beliefs.)"[26] Imagine for a moment that these conditions are met by a very large number of individuals, each of whom is located at a different point along this scale of degrees of belief. In this (perhaps imaginary) case, infinitesimal differences in degree of belief separate those who barely believe from those who are agnostic, and the agnostics from those who very slightly disbelieve. Yet, it seems to us, one can still speak of commitment at the lower reaches of the belief scale, at least as long as (something like) the above two conditions are fulfilled. Must there then be some fixed point or immovable line below which commitment fails—such that all above it are "in" and all below it are "out"? Or might not other doxastic attitudes move to the fore when belief is no longer present but commitment is?

The doxastic position that suggests itself when the two conditions are met but when the degree of confidence in Proposition X fails to qualify as "clearly believing" we are calling religious *Christian possibilism*. It involves a pre- or quasi-believing stance toward at least some of the traditionally proposed objects of Christian belief. How might the key features of such a stance be specified?

Possibilist Faith

It is important, first of all, not to exaggerate the novelty, within the larger Christian tradition, of identifying

one's core Christian attitude with a response to an apprehended possibility in contrast to a believed actuality. For it may be the case that Christian "faith," when clearly understood, has often been seen as a matter of responding to a perceived possibility of divine address or vocation. No doubt the location of the boundary between believed actuality and apprehended possibility has shifted historically, so that claims that in the past seemed firmly established by evidence no rational person could deny can now be received, by many of us, as possibilities only. Even so, it is arguable that faith was never seriously conceived as a response to what could be known as ordinary facts are known. Probably it was always a matter of deciding to act—or being surprised by the discovery that one *could* act or even *must* act—on the basis of possibilities whose correspondence to reality could not be directly grasped or "seen."

Whatever may be true historically, the conception of faith as a response to an apprehended possibility of divine vocation is distinguishable both from the robust belief that God has acted/spoken and from merely "playing along" with claims that one takes to be fictional, even if symbolically or pragmatically useful. The first claim should be obvious: a doxastic attitude that falls short of actual belief in the truth of (say) Proposition X cannot be identical with straightforward belief in that proposition. Of course, to some persons it will appear unnecessary, or even dangerous, to associate Christian commitment with anything other than robust belief. But they are matched (if not cancelled out) on other side by a significant number of persons for whom *any* degree of belief in Christian truth claims has become problematic.

The second claim is perhaps less obvious; how, after all, is Christian possibilism any different from Christian "make-believe," where one "acts as if" Christianity were true while actually claiming to know that it isn't? But this objection misconstrues the position. If the possibilist actually *knew* that the beliefs in question were untrue, she would indeed be engaged in a sort of hypocrisy—the bad-faith exercise of acting out the entailments of propositions one knows to be false.[27]

The possibilist, however, does not merely "play along" with fictional claims. Far from holding that the truth or falsity of Christian claims does not matter, that all that counts is the pragmatic or symbolic usefulness of acting in a certain way, the possibilist holds that the truth or falsity of these beliefs matters supremely. She is committed, at least in principle, to exploring any lines of thought or action that might offer her reasons either to believe or not to believe. Indeed, her sense that it is crucial to her personally

whether or not the claims are true moves her beyond the careful neutrality of the religious dabbler or the judicious skeptic who wishes only to give all options equal time. Condition (2) above required that the agent be prepared to act on the possible truth of Proposition X, even in an epistemic situation in which she does not possess what (she takes to be) sufficient reasons for actual belief. Unsure of the final truth of Proposition X, she nonetheless accepts the obligations of discipleship, hoping thereby to come to know (and satisfied that, short of knowing, she has acted according to the most important possibility).

One might ask whether this position is really a livable—that is, a psychologically viable—position. Why isn't it, for instance, a prescription for endless vacillation between actually doubting and actually believing? In the first place, it isn't clear that vacillation (within certain bounds) is all that far removed from what faith traditionally and properly consists in. And in the Christian case such vacillation is constrained, to some and perhaps to a quite significant extent, by the holistic interrelation of particular parts of the gospel narrative. This interrelation makes it fairly easy for someone who becomes convinced, whether permanently or temporarily, of the fictionality of a particular claim to treat that claim as symbolic of some other claim—for instance, to treat a reported miracle of Jesus as a symbolic expression of the resurrection. In other words, one can keep alive the possible validity of the gospel as a whole without having to treat each part of the gospel, at all times, as a genuine historical possibility.

This is not to say that nothing has changed or that nothing has been lost. In other eras, it was perfectly possible for a sophisticated Christian thinker—Calvin, for instance—to suppose that the divine authority of the biblical narrative was sufficiently proven by the apparent historical fact of fulfilled prophecy to render the basic truth of the gospel story knowable by reason. Such shared historical knowledge still left certain claims in the status of possibilities to be appropriated by faith—chiefly, the possibility that God had acted salvifically not just for others but for me personally. We might say that, since Calvin's era, the world of secure Christian belief has contracted substantially, while the world of faith has expanded. And the result has surely been to render the social and psychological standing of faith more precarious than it was in former eras.[28]

Indeed, it is not hard to imagine that what might be called the "doxastic burden" of Christian discipleship may have shifted so substantially from belief to faith that faith itself will become increasingly difficult or even impossible for would-be disciples who understand what has occurred. Perhaps it will turn

out that faith can only thrive in a context in which the apprehended possibilities are projected against a widely-shared background of supposed actualities. On the other hand, if God exists and has indeed acted in Christ, then it is unlikely that God would let faith die out in this way. To apprehend the possibility that God has acted is therefore also to apprehend the possibility that faith itself remains a viable possibility. For that reason, an historical calculation of probabilities and improbabilities, even if it yields a scenario of decreasing believability, cannot succeed in rendering faith an impossibility—although it may still happen that, in one or another case, the contraction of belief will in fact leave faith with too great a burden.

An Epistemology of Christian Acceptance

The Possibilist denies that firm belief in the traditional sense is a necessary condition for genuine Christian commitment, offering in the place of belief certain criteria of attitude and behavior. Earlier we mentioned two general criteria for distinguishing possibilistic commitment from a mere withholding of belief. But how, more exactly, should the features of a possibilistic commitment to a religious proposition be specified? On this view, it must involve more than merely disbelieving (or being skeptical) about Christian truth claims; it must reflect engagement and concern with the truth-question rather than a dispassionate self-distancing; and it must be enduring enough to support some form of self-identification with the Christian tradition. Finally, as we will see below, it must also be strong enough to support some version of Christian discipleship.

Perhaps the best general term for the doxastic attitude we have in mind is *acceptance*.[29] The main philosophical question posed by our account, then, is whether one can develop a theory of acceptance that will distinguish it from mere "acting as if" on the one hand and from actual belief on the other.

To accept a proposition is, negatively considered, to stand in a relation of non-denial to it; positively, accepting a proposition means conforming oneself to it in some manner—doxastically, pragmatically, aesthetically or emotionally. But one can also locate acceptance along a scale of doxastic attitudes. Suppose we construct a scale running from the judgment that a proposition is "certainly true" (call this 1) to the judgment that it is "certainly false" (call this 0). According to H.H. Price in his classic treatment of belief, "the lowest degree [of assent; on the scale just proposed it would be just at or above .5] is traditionally called surmising or suspecting, and the highest degree is called conviction. Between these

two extremes there are the various degrees of opinion."[30]

The trouble with many accounts of doxastic attitude is that features of robust believing (conviction, constancy, consistency) are projected onto the vague regions near the boundaries of belief. When I *surmise* or *suspect* that something might be the case, I can perhaps be said to believe it, but only in a quite attenuated sense. The lines between *surmising* that *p*, *somewhat inclining* toward *p*, and *merely wishing* or *hoping* that *p* are thin indeed. It is far too crude to say that one either believes or doesn't believe—and not only because there may be significant flux over time. Consider, for example, Price's analysis of the notion of *half-belief*:

> "I see now that at that time I only half-believed what he told me." I did not quite believe it, but I did not disbelieve it; and yet I was not in a state of suspended judgement about it either. My attitude was one which came fairly close to believing and yet did not go all the way; or it had some of the characteristics of believing, but lacked others.[31]

On our scale, half-belief would presumably be scored as a .5. But it is a .5 that is crucially different from agnosticism, that is, from the suspension of judgment regarding a proposition that I neither believe nor disbelieve. For here the agent *both believes and disbelieves the proposition in question*. Agnosticism is dispassionate and detached, whereas half-belief can involve

(a) significant involvement with the proposition in question,

(b) high emotional investment in the question of its truth or falsity, and even

(c) the commitment to act on the hope (wish, wager) that it may turn out finally to be true.

Indeed, since boundaries are so fluid here, these same features could even obtain if one slipped slightly below the line of half-belief into a state that was more disbelief than belief. If an attitude exhibits these three features, even if the degree of belief is less than or equal to .5, we will say that the agent *accepts* the proposition in question. Acceptance thus designates a doxastic attitude the positive features of which are based on *a decision to act in a certain way* and not necessarily on direct assent to a proposition.

In the Christian case, one might surmise that when a person meets these conditions for acceptance, *what* she accepts is simply given to her by her tradition. A person either acts in accordance with the Christian tradition or she does not. There is some truth to this assumption: the religious person may have a basic commitment to the tradition without having a firm belief in any particular proposition. Yet further

reflection shows that this on/off picture is not quite accurate. It's not the case that one simply accepts or rejects Christianity as a whole while varying along a full continuum from full belief to persistent doubt on individual doctrines. Instead, some decision must still be made about the broad parameters of *what it is* that one accepts. A given person may view the resurrection, for example, as definitive for her stance of Christian acceptance at the same time that she does not put the miracles ascribed to Jesus or the Ascension of Mary in this category. Another person may take, say, the authority of the church as a given to be pragmatically accepted, even though she rejects the historicity of the biblical records virtually *in toto*.

How, then, are acceptance and belief related, if both play a role in religious commitment and yet their roles are not identical? One accepts (by and large) what one's tradition asserts by participating in that tradition; one believes what one personally finds credible. Thus a religious person may change, over time, not only what she believes but also what she accepts as basic to Christian commitment. Presumably the content of what one accepts will be much more resistant to change than one's belief or disbelief in particular claims. But it would be misleading to say that the object of acceptance is completely stable and objective, while belief is variable and subjective. Acceptance still involves judgment about content, about *what ought to be accepted*.

In certain cases the differences between these two modes of commitment can be subtle, since the object of acceptance still involves some judgment on the part of the religious person. Moreover, one might complain, "believing what one personally finds credible" has a Western, individualistic ring to it—it could be that one finds credible exactly what is asserted by one's parents, culture, or religious community. The distinction is nonetheless sound. It would be misleading to say that a tradition sets *no* parameters on what counts as its essential content. Conversely, the individual moment in belief is irreducible: one simply believes what one believes and disbelieves what one disbelieves. You cannot be commanded to believe what you don't believe, nor can you make yourself believe by a simple act of the will. (You can, however, will yourself to go certain places and do certain things that will make it likely that you will, with time, come to believe a certain thing.[32])

Christian Discipleship

From the standpoint of discipleship, it is extremely significant that the role of will in acceptance is greater

than in belief. For an agent can choose to act in the manner in which a person acts who believes Proposition X, and she can persist in this choice even when actual belief, subjective conviction, or the very desire to act in this manner are lacking.

By contrast, it is absurd to will belief in a proposition that one does not believe.[33] When I try to believe what I do not believe, I find myself engaging in make-believe. Take the proposition that Garmisch-Patenkirchen is only ten kilometers from Munich, where I am now writing. If I act as if I believe this, I may, for example, set out on foot on Sunday morning and announce to you that I plan to have my midday meal in a Garmisch restaurant. Of course, I might *not* believe that Garmisch is 10 kilometers away and still set out by foot to walk there; my *actions* in both cases might be identical. But if I don't believe this proposition, I simply don't believe it—whatever my actions may be.[34]

Now something interesting results if the belief in question cannot be empirically verified or falsified as clearly as the Garmisch belief. You can learn decisively within one day that Garmisch is not an easy morning's walk—perhaps a painful lesson! But religious beliefs admit only of "eschatological verification," as John Hick argued some thirty-five years ago.[35] In such cases acceptance can play a much more decisive role. Instead of walking to Garmisch, imagine that you set out to "walk" to the Celestial City, as John Bunyan's Pilgrim did. Along this walk you may at times not actually believe that there is a Celestial City, or that one can get to it by walking in a certain way. Yet when verification is deferred, it is not at all absurd to "act as if." If you "act as if" on the way to Garmisch, you will only get sore feet; the 100 kilometers will not get any shorter. But if you accept Proposition X—acting as one does who actually believes it—then you may in the course of things exercise what would properly be called discipleship. And, almost as an incidental byproduct of your "walking" in this way, you may in time actually come to believe that Proposition X is true.

Acceptance thus allows for the doxastic state in which one is "acting as if" but not (at least at that time) believing. Acceptance does not require actual belief, but it does express a significant *judgment*. It might be a judgment about what it makes sense for the church (and the people who constitute it) to maintain on a consistent basis—rather than a judgment, on some given occasion, about what I consider more or less likely to be the case.

Conclusion

As an epistemological position, possibilism shares several features with its main alternatives in the literature today. It asks not about universal rational principles but about the support for the agent's own actions and beliefs, introducing questions of rationality at this level. Its first concern is with the rationality not of belief but of commitment. But unlike many of its competitors, it explores the logic of commitment at the lower levels of belief—and even in cases that fall short of actual belief in a given proposition or set of propositions. We have argued that commitment can survive, and survive as rational, even in cases of actual non-belief.

Is the possibilist stance more skeptical than its competitors? At first blush it might seem to be so, since it countenances (mere) acceptance in the place of full belief. But suppose we understand skepticism not to consist in doubts about whether a given proposition is true, but (more interesingly) to consist in the denial that one has reasons to believe what one nevertheless finds oneself believing. There is nothing skeptical, in that sense, about an argument that preserves the connection between reasons and belief but defends the rationality of distinguishing belief from commitment. What *would* be skeptical, from this point of view, would be an argument that defended belief on the basis of (reasonless) dispositions.

Again, the critic might respond, following William James, that believing or not believing is a matter of limited time, the highest urgency, and the highest stakes. But here one grasps the advantage of possibilism over the mere suspension of belief. There is nothing neutral about the possibilist stance; one does not sit back with scientific (or dogmatic) detachment and wait for overriding evidence. Nothing prevents the possibilist from embracing the most urgent form of, say, Christian discipleship.

Possibilism describes the situation of someone who cannot arrive at full belief. Although it entails practice, it does not guarantee that the situation of doubt will be overcome. Indeed, it presupposes an agent who has already internalized the powerful sources of doubt that have emerged from the broader debate about the truth of religious claims. There is nothing irrational about the doubts that result from this process; indeed, perhaps religious persons *ought* to doubt more. Rather, the question is whether such doubts can nonetheless be fully compatible with religious commitment. And the thrust of this paper has been to suggest that, indeed, they can.[36]

ENDNOTES

1. See for example Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in Plantinga and Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983]); Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993]).

2. See William Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991).

3. Nothing turns on the name, of course. Perhaps it's justified by the fact that many Calvinists offer arguments questioning the efficacy of unaided human reason for gaining knowledge of God, and that some appealed to Calvin's doctrine of the darkening of human epistemic faculties through sin. Or perhaps the label merely honors the place of Calvin College in the historical development of this view. We also don't pretend to resolve the question, To what extent is latter-day epistemic Calvinism true to the thought of John Calvin and to what extent does is it a misrepresentation or perversion of his thought? John Beversluis has raised some doubts about this matter in "Reforming the 'Reformed' Objection to Natural Theology," *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (1995): 186-206. Michael Sudduth answers in defense of the historical accuracy of Alvin Plantinga's appropriation of Calvin in "Calvin, Plantinga, and the Natural Knowledge of God: A Response to Beversluis," *Faith and Philosophy* 15 (1998): 92-103.

4. See, e.g., D. Z. Phillips, *Faith Without Foundations* and *Faith and Philosophical Inquiry* (New York: Schocken, 1970). Note that Phillips is a relativist not only about epistemic standards but, unlike the Calvinists, also about truth. We do not explore the latter disanalogy here.

5. T. F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969). Incidentally, in what follows we concentrate on responses in the context of Christian religious belief, even though much of the argument generalizes to other religions as well. In present-day Islam the role of strong belief is even greater than in Christianity. It is much less crucial for Jewish observance in the Conservative and Reformed traditions, and we think much of the argument that follows would be uncontroversial in those traditions. Most of the Eastern traditions are so far from making belief a necessary condition for religious practice that "believers" in those traditions might have trouble seeing what the fuss is all about.

6. Influential representatives of the Liberal Strategy include Rudolf Bultmann, Maurice Wiles, and Edward Schillebeeckx. Among the many writings of Bultmann see esp. *Existence and Faith* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1960). Wiles' approach appears clearly in *God's Action in the World* (London: SCM Press, 1986); see also his "Divine Action: Some Moral Considerations" and the responding essays in Thomas F. Tracy, ed., *The God Who Acts: Philosophical and Theological Explorations* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1994). Schillebeeckx is a more subtle example. In *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, trans. Hubert Hoskins (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), he explicitly distances himself from Bultmann's reductionism, wishing to preserve a place for a supernatural reality in the resurrection event. Nonetheless, his insistence that the miracle involved was a *psychological* one reflects a classically liberal strategy, since it revises the tradition in order to reduce the gospel's offense to a more naturalistic mindset.

7. In recent years the Jesus Seminar has provided the highest level of publicity for this strategy. For a sample of the Jesus Seminar results see Robert Funk, Roy Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus: New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Macmillan, 1993). For earlier works by the Seminar's founder, Robert Funk, see *Parables and Presence: Forms of the New Testament Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), and Funk, ed., *A Structuralist Approach to the Parables* (Missoula: University of Montana, Scholars' Press, 1974).

8. For criticisms of liberal conclusions regarding the historicity of the Gospels, see, for example, Martin Kähler, *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*, trans. and ed. Carl E. Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964). For a similar response to John Hick's skeptical *The Myth of God*

Incarnate, see Michael Green, ed., *The Truth of God Incarnate* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977).

9. For very confident reconstructions of the thoughts and feelings of Jesus and his disciples, despite an otherwise large dose of historical skepticism, see John Shelby Spong, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality? A Bishop's Search for the Origins of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), e.g. pp. 239-282. For another sort of detailed reconstruction see John Dominic Crossan, *The Cross That Spoke: The Origins of the Passion Narrative* (San Francisco: Harper, 1988), and the brief summary in *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), pp. 375-376.

10. See especially William Alston, *Perceiving God* (note 2 above), and now the essays in Thomas D. Senor, ed., *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith: Essays in Honor of William P. Alston* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995). George Wall also argues analogously in *Religious Experience and Religious Belief* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995). Important counterarguments to the Parity Thesis are raised in Mark S. McLeod, *Rationality and Theistic Belief: An Essay on Reformed Epistemology* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993).

11. See John Hick's treatment of the cross-traditional significance of compassion in *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

12. Nancey Murphy considers the criteria on "Christian discernment" strong enough that she uses them to construct epistemological parallels between theology and the natural sciences in *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990). Additional criteria are listed by Nicholas Wolterstorff in *Divine Discourse* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995).

13. There is now an extensive literature on the problem of religious pluralism and its connection to contemporary analytic epistemology and philosophy of religion. Among others see the essays in the two special issues of *Faith and Philosophy* devoted to this topic: 5/4 (Oct. 1988) and 14/3 (July 1997). See also Keith E. Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). But doubts have been raised about how objective the judgments are when Christian thinkers apply criteria such as Yandell's to traditions other than their own, as in Yandell, "Religious Experience and Rational Appraisal," *Religious Studies* 8 (1974): 173-87.

14. See William Hasker, "The Foundations of Theism: Scoring the Quinn-Plantinga Debate," *Faith and Philosophy* 15/1 (January 1998): 52-67, quote p. 63. Hasker's own conclusion is that "religious pluralism does to some extent weaken the support, whether inferential or non-inferential, of religious experience for any particular system of beliefs about the nature of God or ultimate reality. ... The fact that others—Buddhists and Hindu advaitists, for example—experience the divine as having significantly different characteristics has to constitute a problem for her [sc. the individual Christian believer]. And it is exceedingly difficult to see how she is going to find a satisfying resolution of the problem apart from a large-scale apologetic enterprise which will argue for the superiority of theism as a worldview and, indeed, for the particular variety of theism she espouses" (ibid.).

15. Cf. Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, David Basinger, *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 220: "From a purely historical point of view, then, it is difficult to think of religion in isolationist terms. One could construct not only an integrated history of the individual religions, but perhaps also a history of religious faith and practice in the generic sense. ... It would be a history that elicits the actual influence in belief and practice one religion had on another..." Much of what we say here applies outside the West, of course; but there are also differences that militate against overeasy generalizations.

16. So far we have considered only the relative permeability of *group* boundaries to other doxastic options. What about *individual* persons who are confronted by other individuals with competing beliefs? How strong is the analogy between private and group entitlement? A group identity (say, the identity of the Roman Catholic church) is built up over centuries; it includes sacred texts, theological traditions, structures of authority, deep-rooted ritual practices, and an extensive written and oral tradition among its supports.

Individual identities may be informed by these pillars, but they are not identical to them. Even if Christian traditions *were* isolated in today's world, individual members of the tradition would not enjoy the same isolation.

17. For a fuller description of the role of self-conceptions in religious practice, see the essays by Clayton and Knapp, "Is Holistic Justification Enough?" and "Rationality and Christian Self-Conceptions," in Mark Richardson and Wesley Wildman, eds., *Religion and Science: History, Method, Dialogue* (London: Routledge Press, 1996). This theory of self-conceptions was originally worked out in the context of ethical theory in ibid., "Ethics and Rationality," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (April 1993): 151-61.

18. The problem of religious pluralism might begin already when she drives down the street from her church and notes the widely divergent traditions that share her neighborhood. It is even more urgent when her peers in the university (with effort and in good faith) cannot even see the plausibility in the "defeater defeaters" that she offers in answer to their objections to Christianity. She cannot separate herself from them in the same way that she might be able to separate herself from someone on another continent. The intelligent colleague down the hallway who reads many of the same journals as she does and responds, "But this just isn't credible!" *does* matter; his negation is not irrelevant to the status of her own beliefs.

19. See Carnap, "Inductive Logic and Inductive Intuition," in Imre Lakatos, ed., *The Problem of Inductive Logic* (Amsterdam: North Holland Pub. Co., 1968), e.g. p. 260. As James Taylor has pointed out in correspondence, a purely externalist option such as "S is warranted in believing that p (some religious proposition), but she doesn't have any beliefs about her believing or being warranted that p" would not fall on this continuum of doxastic attitudes.

20. For a balanced yet skeptically oriented treatment of recent arguments in apologetics, at least with regard to the question of the existence of God, see Richard M. Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991).

21. See W. K. Clifford, *Lectures and Essays* (1879), excerpted in Baruch Brody, ed., *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion: An Analytic Approach*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1992), pp. 29ff. See also the collection of articles in Gerald D. McCarthy, ed., *The Ethics of Belief Debate* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986).

22. We use "set" or "web" of beliefs in the sense of Peter Forrest's "doxastic systems"; see Forrest, *The Dynamics of Belief A Normative Logic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), chap. 2. Of course, the web metaphor made popular by Quine is not a recipe for epistemic antinomianism either; we need not infer "anything goes" from the pre-existence of a massive set of beliefs, including religious beliefs.

23. Another possible defeater (or at least quasi-defeater) has to do with theories of error: If the believers in not-Proposition X have a theory of error for how Christians might have come to believe (mistakenly) in Proposition X, and if that theory of error is a live option for the Christians involved in the discussion, then this fact also counts as a quasi-defeater--*even if* the Christians have an analogous theory of error for how the others might have *failed* to come to believe in Proposition X (e.g., their minds are darkened by sin).

24. Thus we understand possibilism to include case (1) but not cases (2)and (3) of Peter Forrest's three cases of non-believing (see Forrest, *The Dynamics of Belief*, p. 23):
     "(1) X does not believe that p, because X disbelieves that p.
     (2) X does not believe that p, because X is agnostic about p.
     (3) X does not believe that p, because X has no attitude to p whatever. (Perhaps X has never considered p.)"

25. See John Locke, *Essay*, Book IV, chaps. 15 (esp. section 5), 16, and 19 (esp. section 1). Philosophers such as F. P. Ramsey (*The Foundations of Mathematics, and other Logical Essays* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1931, e.g. pp. 166ff.) later parced Locke's degrees of belief in terms of one's willingness to wager.

26. Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), p. 117.

27. Such a stance would be both psychologically difficult and, presumably, ethically questionable. Pascal's acting-as-if never presupposed a wagerer who in fact knew the propositions in question to be false. It is precisely the uncertainty, and the decision to make a clear commitment in the face of this uncertainty, that characterizes the Pascalian wager. Although we do not base Christian Possibilism on the wager argument, Pascal's approach is not antithetical to the argument given in the text (cf. note 33 below). For recent work on Pascal's wager, see Jeff Jordan, ed. *Gambling on God: Essays on Pascal's Wager* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), and Nicholas Rescher, *Pascal's Wager: A Study of Practical Reasoning in Philosophical Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).

28. Doubts may thus also be an important part of the lives of religious persons: "At least some believers understand such talk [that is, that claims for God's existence can be controversial], and there are many ex-believers and doubting Thomases and people struggling in various ways with religious belief. In their struggles and in their expectable and understandable wrestling with faith, such talk has a home. Questions about whether God is really a figment of our imagination quite naturally arise. Moreover, their typical contexts are not bizarre and metaphysical contexts in which we can ask whether physical objects are real or whether memory beliefs are ever reliable. In our lives, that is, they are, for believer and non-believer alike, not idling questions like 'Is time real?'" (Kai Nielsen, "Religion and Groundless Believing," in Joseph Runzo and Craig K. Ihara, eds., *Religious Experience and Religious Belief: Essays in the Epistemology of Religion* [Lanham: University Press of America, 1986], p. 25).

29. At least one precedent can be found in the literature for this distinction: Plantinga's distinction between belief and acceptance in "Reason and Belief in God":

> Consider a Christian beset by doubts. He has a hard time believing certain crucial Christian claims—perhaps the teaching that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. Upon calling that belief to mind, he finds it cold, lifeless, without warmth or attractiveness. Nonetheless he is committed to this belief; it is his position; if you ask him what he thinks about it, he will unhesitatingly endorse it. He has, so to speak, thrown in his lot with it. Let us say that he *accepts* this proposition, even though when he is assailed by doubt, he may fail to *believe* it—at any rate explicitly—to any appreciable degree. His commitment to this proposition may be much stronger than his explicit and occurrent belief in it; so these two—that is, acceptance and belief—must be distinguished (p. 37).

Although Plantinga makes no further use of the distinction in what follows, and although our own construal of acceptance and belief departs at points from his, the basic distinction remains a helpful one.

Mark McLeod has further clarified the distinction and made analogous use of it in *Rationality and Theistic Belief*, esp. chapter 12.

30. H. H. Price, *Belief* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), pp. 302f.; cf. Lecture 6.

31. Price, *Belief*, p. 302.

32. William Alston has developed an analogous account of the agent's indirect control over what she believes in his essay in Jeff Jordan and Daniel Howard-Snyder, eds., *Faith, Freedom and Rationality: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996). In fact, Alston's position on belief and acceptance (in that essay and in personal communications) is close enough to the view defended here that is it not clear why he should not be labelled a possibilist as well.

33. Pascal's strategy, for example, does not, as is popularly supposed, consist in coming to believe what one does not believe by a direct act of the will. Instead, the Pascalian wagerer engages in a pattern of action that *he believes* is likely over time to lead to her coming to believe—really believe—the propositions in question. In short: the wagerer, rightly understood, chooses to *accept* Christianity (and Pascal's wager alleges to provide reasons for making this decision of the will). The wagerer then acts in a manner consistent with this willing; and with time, if Pascal is right, she may come to actually believe the propositions in question.

34. This is not to deny that a practice of make-believe can have its own kind of richness and importance; see Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

35. John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966); see also Hick's *An Interpretation of Religion*, cited above.

36. We wish to thank Mark McLeod and James Taylor for helpful criticisms of an earlier draft of this essay.