

The Skeptical Christian

Daniel Howard-Snyder
Western Washington University

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Abstract. This essay is a detailed study of William P. Alston's view on the nature of Christian faith, which I assess in the context of three problems: the problem of the skeptical Christian, the problem of faith and reason, and the problem of the trajectory. Although Alston intended a view that would solve these problems, it does so only superficially. Fortunately, we can distinguish Alston's view, on the one hand, from Alston's illustrations of it, on the other hand. I argue that, although Alston's *view* only superficially solves these problems, Alston's *illustrations* of it suggest a substantive way to solve them, a way that I sketch briefly.

According to William P. Alston, the founder of the Society of Christian Philosophers, "Christian faith essentially involves both cognitive and affective-attitudinal elements".¹ The cognitive element, Alston says, is typically taken to be propositional belief, for example, belief that "Jesus of Nazareth...was resurrected after being crucified and buried, and that Jesus is alive today and in personal relationship with the faithful".² Many Christians believe firmly these and other propositions constitutive of the basic Christian story, with utmost assurance.

For them these are facts about which they have no more doubts than they do about their physical surroundings and the existence of their family and friends. Even if they can see how one *could* doubt or deny these doctrines, they are not themselves touched by this. Perhaps this has been part of their repertoire of constant belief for as long as they can remember, and nothing has come along to shake it.³

¹ Alston 1996: 15. Two additional notes. (i) I should register a bit of uneasiness about the phrase "Christian faith," when it is used to pick out a *distinctive* psychological stance toward the Lord, or the basic Christian story. That's because, used in that way, it sounds to me a bit like using "Christian fear" or "Christian pleasure" or "Christian curiosity" to pick out *distinctive* psychological states, or "Christian ingestion" or "Christian digestion" or "Christian excretion" to pick out distinctive biological processes—which seems to me completely wrongheaded. According to the view I champion, there are some closely related psychological stances that we pick out with our faith-talk, e.g. faith-in and faith-that, and these stances can have both secular and religious objects and contents. Thus, the faith that I have when I maintain faith in Frances Howard-Snyder, as a confidant, friend, parent, and lover, is exactly the same psychological stance that I have when I maintain faith in the Lord, as my redeemer and brother. And the faith that I have when I have faith that my children will flourish as adults is exactly the same sort of psychological stance that I have when I have faith that the basic Christian story is true. (ii) I suspect that, if the basic Christian story is true, there will come a time when our thought and speech will be ungendered; a time when, in Christ, there really is no male or female, a time when male and female will have gone the way of slave and master, Jew and Gentile, Democrat and Republican, and the like—along with their vicious stereotypes—a time when gendered speech and thought will have no role to play. And so they will fade away. What would a time like that be like? I don't know, but perhaps it would be something like the speech and thought in this paper.

² *Ibid.*, 16. This is an ungendered "quotation".

³ *Op cit.*

“But,” Alston continues, “not all sincere, active, committed, devout Christians are like this, especially in these secular, scientific, intellectually unsettled times”:

Many committed Christians do not find themselves with such assurance. A sense of the obvious truth of these articles of faith does not well up within them when they consider the matter. They *are* troubled by doubts; they ask themselves or others what reasons there are to believe that all this really happened. They take it as a live possibility that all or some of the central Christian doctrines are false.⁴

These “(quasi) skeptical Christians,” as Alston calls them, “do not find themselves believing in, for example, a bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead in the distinctive sense of belief,” not to mention other aspects of the basic Christian story.⁵

Here a puzzle begins to emerge. For if these skeptical Christians lack belief of the basic Christian story, one might well wonder how they can have Christian faith, as Alston says they do. After all, you might think that, as Alston points out, Christian faith essentially involves a cognitive element; thus, since these skeptical Christians lack belief, they cannot have Christian faith. We might put the puzzle in the form of an inconsistent triad, call it *the problem of the skeptical Christian*:

1. A person’s Christian faith essentially involves a cognitive element.
2. The cognitive element of a person’s Christian faith is belief of the basic Christian story.
3. Skeptical Christians have Christian faith but they lack belief of the basic Christian story.

The problem of the skeptical Christian is a merely theoretical problem: each claim seems initially plausible but they can’t all be true.

There are two further related problems, neither of which is merely theoretical, one of which—call it *the problem of faith and reason*—can be put in the form of an argument, targeting those who would identify as Christians:

1. If your Christian faith is reasonable, then it is reasonable for you to believe the basic Christian story.
2. It is not reasonable for you to believe the basic Christian story.
3. So, your Christian faith is not reasonable.

(Let the notion of reasonableness be epistemic; and substitute whatever other term of epistemic appraisal you wish, e.g. *justified*, *rational*, *warranted*, *up-to-intellectual-snuff*, etc.) Many Christians won’t care whether the conclusion is true, but many others will. Among those who will care, there are those who will deny premise (2), at least with respect to themselves—such Christians are easy to find, even in Christian philosophy (check out Baylor, Biola, Calvin, or Notre Dame). But there is another sort of Christian who cares whether the conclusion is true, namely those who want to reject it, alright, but who concede that premise (2) accurately describes themselves—Alston’s skeptical

⁴ *Op cit.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17, 26.

Christians, for example. They are in a bit of a pickle, not least because it may well seem to them that, in general, someone has reasonable Christian faith only if it is reasonable for them to believe the basic Christian story. Of course, if they accept the conclusion in their own case, they will thereby have strong *prima facie* reason to abandon the Christian life. The problem of faith and reason, therefore, is particularly acute for the skeptical Christian.

As for the third problem—what we might call *the problem of the trajectory*—anecdotal evidence suggests that, at least in the West, Christians these days struggle more with doubt about the basic Christian story than their predecessors. For example, it's not uncommon for a young Christian to go off to college assured in their Christian beliefs, take their first philosophy or religion or literature or history or biology class, and meet for the first time powerful defenses of scientific naturalism or atheism from real-life naturalists and atheists, as well as powerful critiques of considerations in favor of theism in general and Christianity in particular. Such students are often thrown into doubt and they think to themselves something along these lines: "I've got to be honest: while the problems of evil and divine hiddenness, the apparent cultural basis for the diversity of religions, the explanatory breadth of contemporary science, naturalistic explanations of religious experience, and textual and historical criticism, among other things, don't make me believe the basic Christian story is false, they sure do make me wonder, even to the point of, well,...[and this is where sometimes tears well up in their eyes, and their lips start to tremble while they stare at their laps], even to the point that I'm in doubt about it, *serious* doubt. But since I'm in serious doubt about it, I lack belief of it. And since I lack belief of it, I don't have faith. And if I don't have faith, how can I keep on praying, attending church, reciting the creed, worshipping the Lord, going to confession, participating in the sacraments, singing the hymns and songs, witnessing, and the like? It seems I can't, unless I'm a hypocrite. So integrity requires me to drop the whole thing and get out." Of course, our newly-skeptical university student is not alone. The just-displayed trajectory from doubt to getting out can be found at just about any phase or place of life. What might we say to the trajectory-treading skeptical Christian?

Of course, many of us will say, *Get out!* But what about those of us who don't want to say that? I think the first thing we must do is to affirm the way in which they take the life of the mind so seriously, as well as the integrity they display by aiming to live in accordance with their considered judgment. That's non-negotiable, by my lights. If you have to give that up, then get out. But we can also address the basis of their doubt. Frequently, their doubt is grounded in lousy arguments or spell-binding rhetoric, not to mention illegitimate social pressure. (Think Dawkins and Hitchens, or your typical college dorm dynamics.) We can address the arguments, break the spell, and expose the pressure. But even after we've done that, there's a fair bit of work to be done, work that requires certain skills and a fair bit of time. Many skeptical Christians lack the skills and time to conduct a fair and thorough appraisal of the issues, and it is unclear what advice the epistemology of experts would give them. Moreover, I wonder whether, even if they did gain the skills and had the time to conduct a fair and thorough appraisal of the issues, *propositional belief* of the basic Christian story would be the most fitting cognitive response. But whether or not I'm right about that, the main point is that many of these people will retain a significant degree of doubt, significant enough to preclude belief of

the basic Christian story. They have a problem, then, a practical problem: the line of thought indicated by our university student's speech.

Alston sees all this, and makes two crucial points about it.

First, Alston insists that the Christian who lacks belief—the skeptical Christian—“is not necessarily inferior to the *believer*” when it comes to “commitment to the Christian life, or in the seriousness, faithfulness, or intensity” with which they pursue it.⁶ They “may pray just as faithfully, worship God just as regularly, strive just as earnestly to follow the way of life enjoined on us by Christ, [and] look as pervasively on interpersonal relationships, vocation, and social issues through the lens of the Christian faith”.⁷ As such, they can be “all in” when it comes to Christian practice, although they “will undoubtedly receive less comfort and consolation,” be “less assured of the life of the world to come,” and when they do have experiences that they might be inclined to take as “interactions with God,” they “will not be wholly free of nagging suspicions that it is all in [their] own mind”.⁸

Second, while some people might propose to solve our three problems by denying that Christian faith essentially involves any cognitive element, Alston does no such thing. That's because, by Alston's lights, although Christian faith essentially involves a cognitive element, belief is not the only way in which that element can be realized. One can instead *accept* the basic Christian story, and one can accept it reasonably and act on that acceptance with integrity. This is the thrust of Alston's solution to our three problems.

Here's the plan for what follows. After I summarize Alston's views on the difference between belief and acceptance and on the significance of acceptance for Christian faith, I will do two things. First, I'll argue that the cases Alston uses to illustrate the difference between belief and acceptance, and the cases Alston uses to illustrate the significance of acceptance for Christian faith, fail to illustrate that difference and significance. As a result, what Alston has to say about belief, acceptance, and Christian faith only superficially solves our three problems and cannot satisfy the skeptical Christian. Second, I'll argue that the cases Alston uses to illustrate the distinction between belief and acceptance, and the cases Alston uses to illustrate the significance of acceptance for Christian faith, in fact illustrate another way to realize the cognitive element of Christian faith, a way distinct from belief and acceptance, a way that can play the role Alston intended acceptance to play in Christian faith, a way that substantively solves our three problems, a way that the skeptical Christian can find satisfying. But before I turn to these two tasks, some preliminary remarks are in order.

1. Preliminary remarks

First, a methodological point. When I aim to criticize someone's views, I try to assess what they have to say from the perspective of their theoretical framework, as far I can. Thus, although Alston's views of belief and acceptance are ripe for criticism—whose views aren't in this area?—I will for the most part leave them unquestioned. I'm theorizing from Alston's point of view.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17 (Alston's emphasis).

⁷ *Op cit.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

Nor will I question Alston's treatment of Christian faith as largely a matter of faith *in* and faith *that*,⁹ which leads to my second remark. We'll be in a better position to engage Alston if we are alert to how Alston thinks about faith in, faith that, and their relation.

Toward that end, according to Alston, faith *that*—i.e. *propositional faith*, as many call it—is like belief that, propositional belief, in that both involve “a positive attitude toward a proposition,” but the former differs from the latter in at least two ways. Propositional faith, unlike propositional belief, (i) “necessarily involves some pro-attitude toward its object,” looking on its truth “with favor,” and (ii) “has at least a strong suggestion of a weak epistemic position vis-à-vis the proposition in question”.¹⁰ I tend to think that it involves more—in particular, something like resilience in the face of obstacles to living in light of one's positive cognitive attitude and positive conative orientation toward the target proposition—and that it need not involve a weak epistemic position but rather only a suboptimal epistemic position.¹¹ Otherwise I am largely in agreement with Alston.

As for faith *in*—*relational faith*, as I will call it—Alston says that “the crucial feature would seem to be *trust*, reliance on the person to carry out commitments, obligations, promises, or, more generally, to act in a way favorable to oneself”.¹² Trust may be crucial to relational faith, but that can't be the whole story since con-artists rely on their victims in just the way Alston describes but they do not put or maintain faith in them. What more is involved in relational faith I leave for another occasion.

Regarding the relationship between relational faith and propositional faith, Alston writes that

[o]bviously, faith in a person presupposes that one has some positive attitude toward the proposition that the person exists and that [they have] various characteristics that provide a basis for one's faith. But it is not obvious that this attitude has to be properly characterizable as a case of “faith that”.¹³

But why, exactly, is that not obvious? Perhaps Alston's point is that one can have faith in a person while being in a strong epistemic position vis-à-vis the relevant propositions. The positive cognitive attitude toward these propositions *need not be* propositional faith, which, by Alston's lights, involves a weak epistemic position, but—and this is important—the positive attitude toward the relevant propositions *can be* propositional faith. That is, one can have faith in a person only if one has some positive cognitive attitude or other toward the relevant propositions, and that attitude can be faith that they are so. Thus, according to Alston, although relational faith is compatible with propositional faith, it does not require it.

But, Alston says, propositional faith does require relational faith:

⁹ Another alternative is what I call *global faith*. See Howard-Snyder 2016, as well as Audi 2011, Kvanvig 2013, and Kvanvig unpublished a.

¹⁰ Alston 1996: 12.

¹¹ Howard-Snyder 2013b: 367-368 and 369-370.

¹² Alston 1996: 13. Cf. Swinburne 1981: 110ff; Penelhum 1995: 72ff; Schellenberg 2005: 109ff.

¹³ Alston 1996: 13.

It seems plausible that wherever it is clearly appropriate to attribute “faith that,” there is “faith in” in the background. If I have faith that Joe will get the job, I thereby have faith in Joe, of some sort. If I have faith that the church will rebound from recent setbacks, I thereby have faith in the church and its mission.¹⁴

Is it really true that S has faith that x is F only if S has faith in x? It seems not. I have faith that Kirsten will beat the cancer but I don’t thereby have faith in Kirsten; rather, I have faith in Kirsten’s doctors. Alston might reply that faith that x is F requires some relational faith or other, as with my faith in Kirsten’s doctors. I’m suspicious; but instead of pursuing the matter further, I turn to a third preliminary.

Alston focuses on the “cognitive element” of Christian faith, leaving the “affective-attitudinal” element aside. I will follow suit. Our focus, however, should not be taken to indicate that either of us thinks the former is more central to Christian faith than the latter. Not by a longshot.

Fourth, doubt will figure in what follows, as it has already in the expression of our three problems. Alston does not express a view about what doubt involves. Here’s how I will think about it. We must distinguish having doubts about whether p from being in doubt about whether p, and both of them from doubting that p. For one to have doubts about whether p—note the ‘s’—is for one to have what appear to one to be grounds to believe not-p or a lack of grounds to believe p and, as a result, for one to be at least somewhat more inclined to disbelieve p, or at least somewhat less inclined to believe p. For one to be in doubt about whether p is for one neither to believe p nor disbelieve p as a result of one’s grounds for p seeming to be roughly on a par with one’s grounds for not-p. One can have doubts without being in doubt, and one can be in doubt without having doubts. Having doubts and being in doubt are not to be identified with doubting that. If one doubts that something is so, one is at least strongly inclined to disbelieve it; having doubts and being in doubt lack that implication.¹⁵

2. Alston on belief, acceptance, and Christian faith

According to Alston, propositional belief is something mental, specifically a mental state, as opposed to a mental act or process, and more specifically still, a dispositional state that manifests itself under certain conditions like those in the partial dispositional profile he provides:

1. If S believes that p, then if someone asks S whether p, S will tend to respond affirmatively.
2. If S believes that p, then, if S considers whether it is the case that p, S will tend to feel it to be the case that p.
3. If S believes that p, then, if S takes q to follow from p, S will tend to believe q.
4. If S believes that p, then, if S engages in practical or theoretical reasoning, S will tend to use p as a premise when appropriate.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*

¹⁵ For a more thorough discussion of the nature of doubt, see Peels unpublished, Moon unpublished, and Lee 2014.

5. If S believes that p, then, if S learns [suddenly] that not-p, S will tend to be surprised.
6. If S believes that p, then, given S's goals, aversions, and other beliefs, S will tend to act in ways that would be appropriate if it were the case that p.¹⁶

Note that the consequent in each embedded conditional involves a tendency to a certain manifestation. That's because whether any such manifestation is forthcoming will depend on whether any psychological or other obstacles are present. Note also the term "feel" in item (2). By it, Alston does *not* mean a sensation or emotion. Rather, Alston means to "convey the idea that [the manifestation in question] possesses a kind of *immediacy* or *spontaneity*, that it is something one *experiences* rather than something that one *thinks out*, that it is a matter of being *struck by* (a sense of) how things are rather than *deciding* how things are".¹⁷ Others, Alston observes, call the experience in question "consciously [or occurrently] believing p".¹⁸ Moreover, we cannot at will stop believing something we now believe, nor can we at will begin to believe something we do not now believe. Belief is not under our direct voluntary control.

As for acceptance, Alston says that, unlike belief, acceptance is, in the first instance, a mental act. One finds oneself with a belief, whereas to accept p is "to adopt" or "take on board" a positive attitude toward p.¹⁹ Moreover, one cannot believe something at will, but one can accept something at will.²⁰ Furthermore, the *act* of acceptance normally "engenders" a dispositional *state* much like belief, a state also labeled "acceptance".²¹ Alston's rationale for this is that "if acceptance were just a momentary act that left no residue, it would have no point". The "residue" is the dispositional state of acceptance. Contrasting the dispositional states of belief and acceptance with reference to the dispositional profile of the former, Alston writes:

Belief...will involve more confident, unhesitating manifestations of these sorts than acceptance will. But in the main, the story on these components [specifically (1), (3), (4), (5), and (6)] will be the same for acceptance. (In (3), substitute "tend to accept" for "tend to believe".) By far the largest difference is the absence of (2). The complex dispositional state engendered by accepting p will definitely not include a tendency to feel that p if the question of whether p arises.²²

So, according to Alston, the *state* of propositional acceptance differs from propositional belief in three ways: its manifestations will tend to be less confident and more hesitating, its dispositional profile lacks a tendency to feel that p if the question of whether p arises, and it can be "engendered" at will.

I want to make two initial points about the way in which Alston distinguishes belief from the state of acceptance.

¹⁶ Alston 1996: 4, slightly altered for uniform readability.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 241, n4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 9; the dispositional state is "a result of" the act of acceptance (17).

²² *Ibid.*, 9.

First, it's not at all clear that the state of acceptance differs from belief in that belief "involve[s] more confident, unhesitating manifestations" than acceptance. For, as Alston points out, one can have "beliefs of a weaker strength" and "[t]here the dispositions, including the dispositions to taking p as a basis for inferences and behavior, are themselves weaker," that is, they are less confident and more hesitating than "firm belief". Moreover, when Alston characterizes this particular difference between belief and the state of acceptance, Alston qualifies it with "at least firm belief" (that's what goes into the ellipsis in the indented quotation above). This suggests that, according to Alston, weak belief is no different from acceptance when it comes to the degree of confidence and hesitation of their manifestations. So, although the manifestations of the state of acceptance will tend to be less confident and more hesitant than firm belief, the state of acceptance will *not* tend to be less confident and more hesitant than weak belief. The upshot is that the first difference mentioned above—that the manifestations of the state of acceptance will tend to be less confident and more hesitating than belief—really isn't a difference between propositional belief *per se* and the state of propositional acceptance.

Second, regarding the difference in dispositional profiles, we must add something to the profile of acceptance, something that is implicit in the text. Alston tells us that accepting that p involves "taking a stand on the truth value of p," specifically "regarding it as true," giving it one's "mental assent," mentally "affirming" it, and mentally "judging" that it is so.²³ What we have here, I submit, is another item on the dispositional profile of acceptance:

- 7a. If S accepts that p, then, if S considers whether it is the case that p, S will tend to take a stand on p's truth in this sense: S will tend to mentally assent to p, mentally affirm p, and mentally judge that p is so.

Oddly, there is no analogue to (7a) on the dispositional profile of belief. The only items that come close are (1) and (2), but (1) has to do with affirmative *verbal* response and (2) has to do with *feeling* p to be the case; neither has to do with the *mental acts* of assent, affirmation, or judgment. I expect that Alston would consider this an oversight. I therefore add to Alston's dispositional profile for belief the following item:

- 7b. If S believes that p, then, if S considers whether it is the case that p, S will tend to take a stand on p's truth in this sense: S will tend to mentally assent to p, mentally affirm p, and mentally judge that p is so.

So then, as I understand Alston, the difference between belief and the state of acceptance is that item (2), the tendency to feel it to be the case that p when one considers whether p, is on the profile for belief but not acceptance, and acceptance can be "engendered" at will but belief cannot.²⁴

And now we are in a position to see the difference, according to Alston, between Christian faith that involves acceptance, rather than belief, of the propositions constitutive of the basic Christian story. Alston writes:

²³ *Ibid.*, 11, 15, 20.

²⁴ Audi 2011, 80-84, challenges the second difference.

To accept them is to perform a voluntary act of committing oneself to them, to *resolve* to use them as a basis for one's thought, attitude, and behavior. (And, of course, it involves being disposed to do so as a result of this voluntary acceptance.) Whereas to believe them, even if not with the fullest confidence, is to *find* oneself with that positive attitude toward them, to *feel* that, for example, Jesus of Nazareth died to reconcile us to God. That conviction, of whatever degree of strength, spontaneously wells up in one when one considers the matter. And so, at bottom, it is a difference between what one finds in oneself and what one has deliberately chosen to introduce in oneself.²⁵

Alston can't mean the last sentence here. For, on Alston's own view, *what* one finds in oneself when one believes a proposition is something with an importantly different dispositional profile from *what* one introduces in oneself when one accepts it, a difference that looms large in Alston's discussion, as we have seen.

3. Alston's illustrations of acceptance and its significance for Christian faith

So far I have articulated Alston's views on belief, acceptance, and Christian faith. Those familiar with Alston's work will know that two things have been absent from my discussion so far: Alston's illustrations of the distinction between belief and acceptance, and Alston's illustrations of the significance of acceptance for Christian faith. I now bring them to the fore.

To illustrate acceptance, Alston gives three examples.²⁶ Each example is a case in which "it is not at all clear what is the case or what one should do, but the relevant considerations seem to favor one alternative over the others".²⁷

The defensive captain. As the captain of the defensive team I am trying to figure out what play the opposing quarterback will call next. From my experience of playing against them and their coach, and given the current situation, it seems most likely to me that they will call a plunge into the middle of the line by the fullback. Hence I accept that proposition and reason from it in aligning the defense. Do I *believe* that this is the play they will call, unqualifiedly believe it, as contrasted with thinking it likely? No. I don't find myself feeling sure that this is what they will do. Who can predict exactly what a quarterback will do in a given situation? My experience prevents me from any such assurance. Nevertheless I accept the proposition that they will call a fullback plunge and proceed on that basis.²⁸

The humble philosopher. I survey the reasons for and against different positions on the free will issue. Having considered them carefully, I conclude that they indicate most strongly an acceptance of libertarian free will. Do I flat-out believe that we have that kind of free will? There are people who do feel sure of this. But I am too impressed by the arguments against the position to be free of doubts; it

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁷ *Op. cit.*

²⁸ *Op. cit.* This is an ungendered "quotation".

doesn't seem clear to me that this is the real situation, as it seems clear to me that I am now sitting in front of a computer, that I live in Central New York, and that I teach at Syracuse University. Nevertheless, I accept the proposition that we have libertarian free will. I announce this as my position. I defend it against objections. I draw various consequences from it, and so on.²⁹

The army general. Consider an army general facing enemy forces. They need to proceed on some assumption as to the disposition of those forces. Their scouts give some information about this but not nearly enough to make any such assumption obviously true. They accept the hypothesis that seems to them the most likely. They use this as a basis for disposing their forces in the way that seems most likely to be effective, even though they are far from believing that this is the case.³⁰

I want to make three points about these cases.

First, the protagonist in each case accepts one proposition from among *several credible contraries*. For example, in the case of the defensive football captain, there is a variety of options to the plunge (or dive) that call for different defensive alignments. There are sweeps, draws, counters, traps, end arounds, reverses, the bootleg, the option, and a variety of trick plays; and then there are all the passing options. Even if they are in a position to rule out some of these alternatives, they'll sensibly assign each of the multiple remaining ones a significant probability, driving down the likelihood of a plunge.

Second, the protagonist in each case accepts one proposition over its credible competitors because "it seems most likely" or because the reasons for and against the different positions "indicate most strongly" the one over each of the others. It is important to see here that a proposition can be the most likely among each of several contraries and still be no more likely than its negation. In this connection, notice Alston's slide in the football case from the captain thinking a fullback plunge is the "most likely" call to their "thinking it likely". Thinking it likely doesn't follow from thinking it most likely, and it strains credulity to suppose that any defensive captain worth their paycheck would think it likely that a quarterback will call a plunge, even on fourth and goal at the one. Too many alternatives must be assigned a significant probability.

Third, in light of the first two points, it seems extremely implausible that the captain, the general, and the philosopher accept the relevant propositions, given Alston's account of acceptance. That's because, on Alston's account, the dispositional profile for acceptance includes (1) and (7a), and—to focus just on the football case—the captain will have no tendency to *respond affirmatively* if someone asks them whether the quarterback will call a fullback plunge, and no tendency to *mentally assent* to that proposition or to *mentally affirm* or *judge* that it is so if they bring it to mind. Indeed, if you ask any of our protagonists whether the relevant proposition is true, and you gave them enough time to reflect on their situation, I expect you would hear all sorts of hedging and hemming-and-hawing. And the same goes for their purely mental responses; just as a "sense of the obvious truth" of the target proposition "does not well up within them when they consider

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

³⁰ Alston 2007: 133. This is an ungendered "quotation".

the matter,” so an affirmative mental response will not be forthcoming when they consider it.³¹ That’s because, given their evidence, and our charitable ascription of intellectual virtue to them, there are too many alternatives each of which occupies a significant portion of probability space, rendering the target proposition only “most likely” or “most strongly indicated”. It is, therefore, difficult to see these as cases of acceptance, given Alston’s account of acceptance.

I now turn to the significance for Christian faith that Alston ascribes to acceptance. Alston says that many of those who find themselves incapable of believing the basic Christian story might still have it within their power to accept it.³² Alston elaborates on the significance of “the acceptance alternative for Christian faith” by illustrating it with three cases:

Just as the philosopher described previously accepted the thesis of libertarian free will, though they did not spontaneously feel it to be the case, so it is with (quasi) skeptical Christians. This can take several different forms. Perhaps such a person, having carefully considered the evidence and arguments pro and con, or as much of them as they are aware of, judges that there is a sufficient basis for accepting the doctrines, even though they do not find themselves in a state of belief. Or perhaps they have been involved in the church from their early years, from a preskeptical time when they did fully believe, and they find the involvement meeting deep needs and giving their life some meaning and structure. And so they are motivated to accept Christian doctrines as a basis for their thought about the world and for the way they lead their life. Or perhaps the person is drawn into the church from a condition of religious noninvolvement, and responds actively to the church’s message, finding in the Christian life something that is deeply satisfying, but without, as yet, spontaneously feeling the doctrines to be true. Such a person will again be moved to accept the doctrines as something on which they will build her thought and action.³³

I want to make two points about these three cases.

First, Alston calls the person in each case a “(quasi) skeptical Christian,” earlier referring to such people as “troubled by doubts”;³⁴ moreover, Alston likens them to the protagonists in the secular cases. Here we need to keep in mind not only that each of the protagonists in the secular cases fails to “spontaneously feel” the relevant proposition to be the case, but that each of them “accepts” it on the basis of its seeming to be “the most likely” or “most strongly indicated” from among several credible contraries, when “it is not at all clear what is the case”. This suggests that, for Alston, what counts as “a sufficient basis for accepting” the basic Christian story (in the first case) can be pretty thin soup, a suggestion that is confirmed when we see Alston count T.S. Eliot as a skeptical Christian. Despite displaying considerable “skepticism” about Christianity, Eliot reported “accepting” it “because it was the least false” of the credible options.³⁵

³¹ Alston 1996: 15.

³² *Ibid.*, 25-26; cf. 243-44, n43.

³³ *Ibid.*, 17. This is an ungendered “quotation”.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 19, quoting William Wainwright.

One does not sincerely report such a thing unless, at best, one is in doubt about it. So my first point is that, through these cases, Alston invites us to think of at least some skeptical Christians along the lines I have just been emphasizing: as Christians who are in doubt about the basic Christian story, even if, by their lights, it's "the most likely" or "most strongly indicated" or "least false" of the options they deem credible. In what follows I accept Alston's invitation.

Second, when I transpose the frame of mind of Eliot, the captain, the general, and the humble philosopher back into the frame of mind of Alston's three skeptical Christians, I don't see how they could accept the basic Christian story, given Alston's account of acceptance and a charitable construal of their intellectual virtue. Despite the attraction of the Christian story for each of them, if they really are as troubled by doubts as Alston says they are and if they really do regard the Christian story as simply the least false or most likely among the options they deem credible, will any of them be happy to hear of acceptance as an alternative to the belief that eludes them? I doubt it. That's because when they learn that acceptance involves a tendency to respond affirmatively when asked whether the basic Christian story is true—to answer aloud and without qualification, "yes, it is true"—and a tendency to mentally assent to that proposition or to mentally affirm or judge that it is so when it is brought to mind—to answer inwardly and without qualification, "yes, it is so"—they will rightly think that acceptance will elude them every bit as much as belief eludes them. For although they look on the Christian story with favor and they are prepared to act in accordance with it, what they have to go on prepares them, at best, to verbally assert that it is the "most likely" or "least false" and to mentally assent to its being the "most strongly indicated"—all a far cry from asserting *it* or mentally assenting to *it*, both of which the profile of acceptance requires. And why would they want to introduce, at will, such tendencies in themselves anyway, even if they could? To do so would promote cognitive dissonance and violate their intellectual integrity.

This is a good place to consider an important question Alston raises about the epistemic status of belief and acceptance, the question of whether "belief and acceptance have different [epistemic] statuses vis-à-vis the need for evidence, reasons, [or] grounds".³⁶ According to Alston, belief and acceptance differ in their mode of origin and dispositional profile, but neither difference seems relevant to any epistemic status related to evidence, reasons, or grounds. Suppose acceptance can be introduced into oneself at will and belief cannot. What's that got to do with whether Alstonian acceptance requires more or less in the way of evidence, reasons, or grounds than belief in order to satisfy, say, evidentialist, reliabilist, or virtulist standards or principles for epistemic justification? It seems wholly irrelevant. In that case, all the weight for an affirmative answer to our question lands on the difference in dispositional profile: the profile of belief that *p* includes a tendency to feel that *p* is the case when *p* comes to mind—a tendency to an immediate, spontaneous experience of being struck by (a sense of) *p* being how things are—while the profile of acceptance that *p* lacks that tendency. But again: what's that got to do with whether acceptance requires more or less in the way of evidence, reasons, or grounds than belief in order to satisfy, say, evidentialist, reliabilist, or virtulist standards or principles for epistemic justification? It seems wholly irrelevant. And therein lies the rub: there is no other difference between acceptance and belief, on Alston's view. Thus,

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

on Alston's view, belief and acceptance do *not* have different epistemic statuses vis-à-vis the need for evidence, reasons, and grounds. It's not surprising, then, that skeptical Christians will be disappointed by what Alston has to offer them. For what they lack with respect to belief, they also lack with respect to acceptance: *sufficient* evidence, reasons, or grounds to believe—or accept.³⁷

The upshot is that the cases Alston uses to illustrate the difference between belief and acceptance fail to illustrate that difference, and the cases Alston uses to illustrate the significance of a Christian faith whose cognitive element is acceptance fail to illustrate that significance. As a consequence, what Alston has to say about that difference and significance seems to me to provide only a superficial solution to our three problems, as I will now try to make explicit.

Alston aims to solve the problem of the skeptical Christian by denying (2) of our inconsistent triad, the claim that the cognitive element of a person's Christian faith is belief of the basic Christian story. While a person's Christian faith requires a cognitive element alright, says Alston, it need not be belief; it can be acceptance. Thus, Alston continues, skeptical Christians can have Christian faith without belief while still meeting the demand for a cognitive element. However: although strictly speaking, (2) is false on Alston's view, adding acceptance as an alternative does nothing for skeptical Christians. That's because they won't accept the basic Christian story any more than they will believe it. We can put the point this way. Alston's solution is impotent against a slight variation on the problem:

1. A person's Christian faith essentially involves a cognitive element.
- 2'. The cognitive element of a person's Christian faith is belief or acceptance of the basic Christian story.
- 3'. Skeptical Christians have Christian faith but they neither believe nor accept the basic Christian story.

Nothing Alston says allows us to deny (2') and, given an accurate description of the state of mind of skeptical Christians and a charitable assessment of their intellectual virtue, we cannot deny (3'). That leaves (1), which is non-negotiable for Alston. The problem of the skeptical Christian substantially remains.

As for the problem of faith and reason, Alston would sympathetically engage the perspective of skeptical Christians by denying premise (1), the claim that, if your Christian faith is reasonable, then it is reasonable for you to believe the basic Christian story. "Your Christian faith can be reasonable," Alston would say, "even if it is not reasonable for you to believe the basic Christian story. That's because the cognitive element of your Christian faith can be acceptance, and accepting the basic Christian story might be reasonable for you even if believing it is not." This solution is superficial as well. For, once again, although strictly speaking, (1) is false on Alston's view, adding acceptance as an alternative to belief does nothing for skeptical Christians. That's because they are no more apt to accept it than to believe it; moreover, what they have to go on renders acceptance no more reasonable for them than belief, as a variation on the problem reveals:

³⁷ I am expressing a worry about Alston's account of acceptance. Other accounts of acceptance might not fall afoul of that worry.

- 1*. If your Christian faith is reasonable, then it is reasonable for you either to believe or to accept the basic Christian story.
- 2*. It is not reasonable for you to either to believe or to accept the basic Christian story.
3. So, your Christian faith is not reasonable.

Nothing Alston says allows us to deny (1*), and we can't deny (2*) on behalf skeptical Christians since what they have to go on makes it true. Therefore, (3) follows, for skeptical Christians. The problem of faith and reason substantially remains.

As for the problem of the trajectory, Alston would address the line of thought exhibited by our skeptical university student as follows: "Although you are in doubt about the basic Christian story, and you lack belief, you can still have Christian faith. That's because you can accept the basic Christian story, and you can practice without hypocrisy on the basis of such acceptance." This too lacks substance. For although Alston is right that a lack of belief does not imply a lack of faith, that does nothing to help our student. That's because they are in doubt about the basic Christian story, in which case they lack those tendencies that the dispositional profile of acceptance brings with it; moreover, even if they could accept it, they could not accept it in good conscience, given items (1) and (7a) on that profile. Acceptance, therefore, does not stop the trajectory from doubt to getting out. The problem of the trajectory substantially remains.

I conclude that propositional acceptance, as understood by Alston, seems unfit to play the role in Christian faith that Alston envisioned. As a consequence, Alston's view permits only a superficial solution to our three problems. Fortunately, there is an alternative.

4. An alternative positive cognitive attitude for the skeptical Christian

To get in a better position to discern the alternative I have in mind, let's return to Alston's secular cases, the case of the defensive captain, the army general, and the humble philosopher.³⁸

First, we can easily imagine that none of them believes the relevant propositions. The captain has no tendency to feel it to be the case that the quarterback will call a fullback plunge, the general has no tendency to feel it to be the case that the enemy forces are disposed in such-and-such a position, and the humble philosopher has no tendency to feel it to be case that libertarianism is true. No "conviction, of whatever degree of strength, spontaneously wells up in" them when they consider the matter.³⁹

Second, as indicated earlier, it is also extremely implausible to suppose that they accept the relevant propositions, given Alston's account of acceptance. In any case, we can easily imagine that they do not accept them. For example, we can easily imagine that the captain has no tendency to assert that the quarterback will call a plunge if asked or to mentally assent to that proposition if it is brought to mind (and that they have no tendency to be surprised upon suddenly learning that the quarterback made another call).

Third, we can easily imagine that each of our protagonists is in doubt about whether the target proposition is true. That's because each of them thinks that, given what

³⁸ Here I expand on material from Howard-Snyder 2013b: 365-367.

³⁹ Alston 1996: 17.

they have to go on, the target proposition is only more likely or more strongly indicated or the least false among the credible options, which is compatible with it being no more likely than its negation. In that case, we might easily imagine that it appears to each of them that what they have to go on with respect to the truth of the target proposition is roughly on a par with what they have to go on with respect to its falsity and, as a result, neither believes nor disbelieves it and neither accepts nor rejects it.

Fourth, despite their lack of belief and acceptance, and despite their being in doubt, each of them acts on a certain assumption. The captain acts on the assumption that the quarterback called a fullback plunge, the general acts on the assumption that the enemy forces are situated thus-and-so, and the philosopher acts on the assumption that libertarianism is true. Take note: *there really is some cognitive attitude that each of them acts on*. Each of them *assumes that* some proposition is true. Call this cognitive attitude *beliefless assuming*.

Fifth, each protagonist acts on the basis of their beliefless assumption, and they act in ways you would expect given their beliefless assumptions. The captain belieflessly assumes that the quarterback called a fullback plunge, and so they put six men on the line. The general belieflessly assumes that the enemy is situated thus-and-so, and so they disperse their troops for a pincer movement. The philosopher belieflessly assumes that libertarianism is true, and so they hold themselves morally responsible for things they were able to refrain from.

While the foregoing observations locate one way to understand the cognitive attitude involved in Alston's protagonists, we might wish for a more general understanding of their attitude. What is it, exactly? What is it to belieflessly assume that *p*, *in those cases*? This is a difficult question. Beliefless assuming of the sort on display in Alston's cases has not been the focus of much discussion, unlike propositional belief and propositional acceptance. Still, in what follows, I'll make several remarks that I hope will shed enough light to indicate how I propose to think of the matter.

First, we use "assume" in different ways. We sometimes use it to refer to the attitude that we have when we take something for granted or to be obvious, as when we assume that the world is more than five minutes old or that there are persons other than ourselves. I do not mean to use "assume" in this way because, so used, it refers to a propositional attitude too much like belief or acceptance—indeed, it just *is* belief, coupled with full assurance—and so does not fit Alston's cases. On other occasions, we use it to refer to the attitude that we have when we introduce a proposition into our thought for the purpose of considering what follows from it, as when we assume for *reductio* that some times are earlier than themselves or we assume for conditional proof that God exists. I do not mean to use "assume" in this way either because, so used, it refers to a propositional attitude that is too little like belief or acceptance—indeed, it seems to be no more than a bit of mental what-if-ery—and so likewise does not fit Alston's cases.

Second remark: in the sense of "assume" that does fit Alston's cases, one can assume that *p* without believing or accepting it, and while being in doubt about it, as indicated previously. Thus, assuming of the sort in question is not sufficient for belief and acceptance, and so it is distinct from each of them. Even so, belieflessly assuming that *p* might be necessary for each of them. Let's look into the matter briefly.

If beliefless assuming is distinct from belief and acceptance but necessary for each of them, then, whenever someone believes or accepts something, they belieflessly assume it too. Consider some such occasion. For example, suppose I have a dominant desire for banana bread and I believe that there's some in my fridge. Naturally, since there is no inner or outer obstacle to my acting on my belief and desire, I walk to the fridge. Whatever else might be relevant to explaining my walking to the fridge, it seems that my belief that there's some banana bread in the fridge has some work to do. But if belieflessly assuming *p* is necessary for believing *p*, then I not only believe that there's banana bread in the fridge, I belieflessly assume that there is banana bread in the fridge, as well. Here two options present themselves: either my belief and my beliefless assumption simultaneously explain my behavior or only one does. Since explanatory redundancy should be avoided when possible, we should pick only one option; and, since my banana bread belief can explain more that needs explaining (e.g. it explains why I am disposed to assert that there is banana bread in the fridge, whereas my beliefless banana bread assumption does not explain that disposition), we should pick the belief over the beliefless assumption. And what goes for this case goes for every case of belief (putatively) co-existing with beliefless assumption and, *mutatis mutandis*, for acceptance too. The upshot is that, unless there is some good reason to think that beliefless assumption is necessary for belief or acceptance (I know of none), we should theorize from the point of view that beliefless assumption is not necessary for belief or acceptance. At any rate, that is what I propose to do in what follows.

Third, if beliefless assumption of the sort displayed in Alston's cases is distinct from belief and acceptance, compatible with being in doubt, and neither necessary nor sufficient for belief or acceptance, we might wonder how its dispositional profile differs from those of belief and acceptance. In this connection, recall that being in doubt about *p* is incompatible with belief and acceptance of *p* because of their dispositional profiles. When one is in doubt about whether *p*, one *lacks* a tendency to feel it to be the case that *p* upon considering whether *p*; one *lacks* a tendency to verbally affirm that *p* when asked whether *p*, one *lacks* a tendency to mentally assent to *p*, or to mentally affirm or judge that *p* is true; and one *lacks* a tendency to be surprised upon suddenly learning not-*p*. But now recall that being in doubt about *p* is compatible with belieflessly assuming that *p*. It follows that the dispositional profile of beliefless assumption lacks these tendencies as well.

Fourth remark: even though beliefless assumption differs from belief and acceptance in these ways, it functions similarly to them in reasoning and other behavior, as evidenced by the protagonists in Alston's cases. Specifically, if one belieflessly assumes that *p*, then, if one takes *q* to follow from *p*, one will tend to assume that *q* as well. And if one assumes that *p*, then, if one engages in practical or theoretical reasoning, one will tend to use *p* as a premise when appropriate. And, in general, if one belieflessly assumes that *p*, then, given one's goals, aversions, and other cognitive attitudes, one will tend to act in appropriate ways.

Fifthly, we must resist the temptation to identify beliefless assumption with mere acting as if. One can act as if one believes that *p* while disbelieving or rejecting *p*, but one cannot belieflessly assume that *p* while disbelieving or rejecting *p*. For when one belieflessly assumes that *p*, one lacks the dispositional profile of disbelief; but when one

disbelieves that p, one possesses its dispositional profile, even though one might dissemble and act as if one believes that p.

With these observations and remarks in hand, let's return to Alston's skeptical Christians. In light of what has been said about beliefless assumption, we are now in a better position to see how the required cognitive element of Christian faith need not pose a stumbling block to them. To keep what follows manageable, I will, like Alston, focus on propositional faith with Christian content and relational faith with a Christian object, and I will focus on Alston's second case, the person who has been involved in the church from their early years, from a preskeptical time when they did fully believe.⁴⁰ Alston doesn't say how they became "troubled by doubts," so imagine that their story unfolds as follows.

After a decade of study and reflection that began as an undergraduate and continued throughout their twenties, they now find themselves deeply troubled by arguments for atheism that challenge the goodness and love of God, arguments posed by sincere, respectful, and admirable atheists. Moreover, they find themselves stunned by the failure of Christian theologians they have read to articulate unproblematic theories of how it is that God was in Christ reconciling God to sinners, especially in light of later doctrinal developments on this score. All this has left them in doubt about the basic Christian story, and therefore they are in no position to believe it or accept it. That's not to say that they fail to appreciate what can be said on behalf it. On the contrary. By their lights, it's the least false of the options they deem credible. At any rate, that's what they would say if you caught them on good day. On a bad day, they might be more inclined to say that, so far as they can tell, it's no more false than the best of the credible options. They vacillate between these skeptical poles. But despite their up-and-down cognitive situation, they continue to find their involvement in the church meeting deep needs and giving their life meaning and structure, and they find the way of love modeled by Jesus and many of Jesus's followers supremely attractive, so much so that they are motivated to align their will with Jesus's will as Jesus's disciple, and to belieflessly assume and thereby use the basic Christian story as a basis for their thought about the world and for the way they lead their life.⁴¹ So, despite their doubt, they continue in the practices of devotional reading, meditation, confession, thanksgiving, intercession, charity, the sacraments, congregational participation, observing the holy days and holidays, singing the great hymns and songs, teaching children how to live the story, etc., finding these and related activities and commitments not only satisfying, but activities and commitments around which the rest of their life is shaped. In short, our skeptical Christian intentionally opens themselves to the presence of the Lord and the power of the Spirit—to no avail, so far as they can tell. But they don't let that take the wind out of their sails or the sap out of their bones; they don't let that dishearten or discourage them from following Jesus.

Our protagonist has Christian faith—or so I say. They have faith *that* the basic Christian story is true, although they neither believe it nor accept it. The cognitive element of their faith is beliefless assumption; just as the defensive captain belieflessly assumes that the quarterback will call a fullback plunge, they belieflessly assume the basic Christian story. They also have faith *in* the Lord, despite their doubt. The cognitive element of their faith in the Lord is also beliefless assumption; just as the general

⁴⁰ *Op. cit.*

⁴¹ *Op. cit.*

believably assumes that the enemy is positioned thus-and-so and consequently aligns their troops for a pincer movement, they believably assume that the Lord will remain true to them, and they believably assume that the Lord will act favorably on their behalf with respect to their salvation; consequently, they align their will with the Lord's and act accordingly. Their faith in the Lord—including their faith that despite their struggles with doubt, the Lord will never leave them or forsake them—provides enough stability and hope to battle late-stage cancer and its damnable effects, as well as the impetus to tackle the more ordinary demons of a human life.

It should be clear that our skeptical Christian “is not necessarily inferior to the *believer*” when it comes to “commitment to the Christian life, or in the seriousness, faithfulness, or intensity with which” they pursue it.⁴²

In this connection, one of the more wacky objections I've heard to my thesis that beliefless assumption can be the cognitive element of Christian faith is that, on my view, it's too easy to have Christian faith. Apparently, a suitably difficult way requires belief of the basic Christian story, perhaps held “with certainty, without any hesitation or hanging back”.⁴³ That way, when your total evidence, reasons, grounds, and whatever else you have to go on changes in such a way that you ought no longer to believe, or you ought to reduce your confidence in what you believe, you have a magnificent opportunity to exhibit Christian virtue by embracing the tension wholeheartedly, knuckling down, and believing all the same, with just the same confidence as before. That's true standing up for Jesus! I must leave an examination of this doxolatrous approach to Christian faith for another occasion.⁴⁴ As for the charge that my view makes it insufficiently difficult to have Christian faith, two points are relevant. First, in general, and all else being equal, it is more difficult to act in accordance with a proposition you take some cognitive attitude toward if you believably assume it than if you believe it. Second, if you have any doubt about whether Christian faith with beliefless assumption rather than belief as its cognitive element is an exception to the rule, I say, try it out some time. Then you'll have a better idea how silly it is to suggest that it's easier to have Christian faith without belief.

Before I address an Alstonian objection to what I've put forward, let me briefly summarize how beliefless assumption allows us to proffer a substantive solution to our three problems. As for the problem of the skeptical Christian, we can deny the claim that the cognitive element of Christian faith is belief or acceptance of the basic Christian story since one might well assume them, which, unlike Alston's solution, is at home with the cognitive situation of skeptical Christians. As for the problem of faith and reason, we can deny the claim that if your Christian faith is reasonable, then it is reasonable for you either to believe or to accept the basic Christian story. For even if it is not reasonable for you either to believe or to accept the basic Christian story, it might yet be reasonable for you to believably assume it, which, unlike Alston's solution, is consonant with the cognitive situation of skeptical Christians and keeps their faith reasonable, at least in so far as its cognitive element is concerned. As for the problem of the trajectory, we can

⁴² Alston 1996: 17 (Alston's emphasis). Indeed, you might consider her an exemplar of Christian faith. In this connection, we would do well to reflect on the life of Mother Teresa in light of her private writings. See Kolodiejchuk 2007.

⁴³ Stump 2003: 363; cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* IIaIIae.1.4 and IIaIIae.4.8.

⁴⁴ For a splendid contemporary example of this approach—one that even embraces explicit contradictions!—see the “Way of Aporia,” which is better labeled the “Way of Dogmatism,” in Sullivan 2014.

explain to our newly-skeptical university student how the trajectory from doubt to getting out can be broken since they might belieflessly assume the basic Christian story and act with integrity on the basis of that assumption, which, unlike Alston's solution, allows them to continue practicing their faith with a clear conscience, although it's likely to be difficult, perhaps very difficult. But whoever said following Jesus would always be easy, cognitively or otherwise? Not Jesus.

5. An Alstonian objection to beliefless assumption as the cognitive element of Christian faith

In a revealing passage, Alston contrasts accepting a proposition with acting on the beliefless assumption that it is true.

When the press of affairs requires us to act on one assumption or another, we cannot wait for more evidence. This is the situation of our defensive captain. They must dispose their players in one way rather than another, based on one or another assumption as to what the offense will do. But they still need not accept a particular hypothesis on that point. They can adopt an *assumption*, a *working hypothesis*, for the sake of action guidance without accepting it. Accepting *p* involves a more positive attitude toward that proposition than just making the assumption that *p* or hypothesizing that *p*. The difference could be put this way. To accept that *p* is to regard it as true, though one need not be explicitly deploying the concept of truth in order to do so. But one can *assume* or *hypothesize* that *p* for a particular limited purpose, as our captain might have done, without taking any stand on truth value. Again, one can assume or hypothesize that *p* for the sake of testing it, trying it out in practice, so as to help one decide whether to accept it.⁴⁵

Although Alston does not have in mind here the thesis that beliefless assumption can be the cognitive element in Christian faith, I surmise that these remarks suggest that Alston might not look kindly on it.

We might put the objection like this. Christian faith essentially involves a cognitive element, some positive cognitive attitude toward the basic Christian story.⁴⁶ However, when one merely belieflessly assumes the basic Christian story, one does so just for the purpose of trying it out, to see what happens, perhaps as a field anthropologist might do with any eye toward immersing themselves in the point of view of the people they're studying,⁴⁷ or perhaps, as Alston suggests, our defensive captain might have done. That cognitive attitude, however, is not positive enough. The cognitive element of Christian faith requires one to take a stand on its truth, to believe it or accept it.

The central thought here targets the credentials of beliefless assumption as a positive cognitive attitude. The idea is that, unlike belief and acceptance, beliefless assumption really isn't a positive cognitive attitude at all since it does not involve taking a stand on the truth of its propositional object. Of course, that raises the question of what taking a stand on the truth of a proposition requires. I suspect that those who are tempted by this idea will answer that in order for a cognitive attitude toward *p* to involve taking a

⁴⁵ Alston 1996: 11. This is an ungendered "quotation".

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁷ For what this might look like in the sociology of religion, see Luhrman 1989 and 2012.

stand on the truth of p, its owner must have at least some tendency to assert p when asked, or at least some tendency to mentally assent to p when it comes to mind.

But it seems to me that, although the dispositional profile of beliefless assumption lacks these tendencies, it includes other tendencies that constitute taking a stand on the truth of what is belieflessly assumed. For just as when one believes or accepts that p, when one belieflessly assumes that p, one will tend to use p as a premise in practical and theoretical reasoning when appropriate and one will, more generally, tend to act in ways befitting one's goals, aversions, and other cognitive attitudes. This is why we expect that, when the defensive captain belieflessly assumes that the quarterback will call a plunge, they will stack six men on the line rather than four; this is why we expect that, when the general belieflessly assumes that the enemy is situated thus-and-so, they will disperse their troops for a pincer movement rather than a frontal assault; this is why we expect that, when the humble philosopher belieflessly assumes libertarianism, they will, for example, use it in their theodicy rather than neglect it for that purpose. This is why we expect that, when the skeptical Christian I described earlier belieflessly assumes the basic Christian story and the trustworthiness of the Lord, they confess their sins, partake of the sacraments, realign their will regularly through prayerful self-examination, gives generously, and so on. *By performing these actions rather than certain others*, each of our protagonists manifests tendencies that constitute taking a stand on the truth of what is belieflessly assumed, even though tendencies to assert verbally and assent mentally are absent.

Perhaps the worry lies elsewhere. Perhaps the worry is that, even if beliefless assuming involves taking *some* sort of stand on the truth of what is belieflessly assumed, it isn't enough of a stand. It's too much like just putting one's toes in the water, or just taking a sip, or just holding hands, or smoking pot without inhaling. It's too much like assuming just for the purpose of trying it out, just to see what happens, just to give it a whirl. It's too non-committal, too much like mere hypothesizing or conjecturing.

It is difficult to know what to say in reply. Does the skeptical Christian I described before *look* like they are belieflessly assuming the basic Christian story *just* for the purpose of trying it out, *just* to give it a test drive, *just* to see whether they want to buy in? Of course not. They've bought in more fully than nearly all of the believing Christians I know. Moreover, they don't belieflessly assume it *just* "for the sake of action guidance" or *just* "for a particular limited purpose," but rather because it seems to them, at least most of the time, the most likely, the most strongly indicated, or the least false of the options they deem credible. And, having belieflessly assumed it, they may well structure their life around it, and thereby shape their life into a meaningful, purposeful whole.⁴⁸

As for the suggestion that beliefless assumption, *on my understanding of it*, is too much like hypothesizing or conjecturing, three points are relevant. First, unlike beliefless assuming, hypothesizing and conjecturing *are* just for the sake of action guidance. Second, unlike beliefless assuming, one does *not* hypothesize or conjecture something because it seems to one the most likely of the credible options but rather because one wonders what follows from it; hypothesis and conjecture have a what-if-ery quality about them that assuming lacks. Third, unlike beliefless assuming, one does *not* hypothesize or conjecture a worldview and then structure one's entire life around it. We might put the

⁴⁸ For more on faith unifying a life, see Kvanvig 2013 and unpublished a, and Dewey 1934, chapter 1.

point this way: Alston has a sense of “assuming” in mind according to which to assume that p is merely to adopt it as a “working hypothesis,” to make a conjecture. That’s not the sense of “assume” I have in mind, nor is it the sense of “assume” on which it makes sense to say that the captain, the general, the philosopher, Eliot, or the skeptical Christian acts on the beliefless assumption that the target proposition is true. In this second sense of “assumes,” to belieflessly assume that p “involves a more positive attitude toward that proposition than just” hypothesizing or conjecturing that p.

Alston aimed to exhibit how the skeptical Christian could have Christian faith—but failed, in my judgement. However, by examining the ways in which Alston illustrated belief, acceptance, and their relation to Christian faith, I hope to have shown how that aim can be achieved. We simply need to follow Alston’s lead a bit further and broaden our horizons with respect to the variety of ways in which “sincere, active, committed, devout Christians” might meet the cognitive demand of Christian faith.⁴⁹ In particular, we would do well to countenance beliefless assumption, perhaps among other ways.^{50,51}

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⁴⁹ Alston 1996: 16.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Audi 2011, Kvanvig unpublished b, McKaughan 2013 and unpublished, Pojman 1986, Roeber unpublished, Schellenberg 2006, and Swinburne 1981. For discussion of Schellenberg 2006, see Howard-Snyder 2013a.

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