


## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Theorizing about Christian faith in God with John Bishop

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### Abstract

We assess John Bishop's theory of the nature of Christian faith in God, as most recently expressed in 'Reasonable Faith and Reasonable Fideism', although we dip into other writings as well. We explain several concerns we have about it. However, in the end, our reflections lead us to propose a modified theory, one that avoids our concerns while remaining consonant with some of his guiding thoughts about the nature of Christian faith in God. We also briefly examine three normative issues Bishop's views present.

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William James' famous essay, 'The Will to Believe', continues to inspire reflection on the nature of faith and the conditions under which it can satisfy a variety of epistemic and moral principles, often as a counter to W. K. Clifford's insistence that 'it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence'.<sup>1</sup> We here assess the considered view of one leading contemporary proponent of a neo-Jamesian perspective, John Bishop, as most recently expressed in 'Reasonable Faith and Reasonable Fideism'.<sup>2</sup>

Bishop approaches theorizing about faith by taking what he calls 'Christian faith in God' as a paradigm case of the phenomenon that interests him.<sup>3</sup> His theory of Christian faith in God, and its surrounding commentary, raises a number of issues we have found especially worth reflecting upon. After an initial statement of his theory, we explain several concerns we have about it, some major and some minor. We organize our initial concerns around three themes, namely its adequacy as (i) a theory of Christian faith *in* God, (ii) a theory of Christian *faith* in God, and (iii) a theory of *Christian* faith in God. In addition, we consider three normative claims he makes, namely (i) that Christian faith in God requires 'the absence of independent empirical rational endorsement of its truth', (ii) that it can be epistemically rational only if evidentialism is false, and (iii) that it can be morally permissible only if the Christian worldview is 'essentially evidentially undecidable'.<sup>4</sup> We close by briefly proposing a modified theory that avoids our concerns and accords with some of his guiding thoughts about the nature of Christian faith in God.

### Bishop's theory of Christian faith in God

As Bishop notes, he is not 'offering a theory of faith *in general*', but rather a theory of *Christian faith in God*, one that specifies the 'nature' of that faith, what it 'essentially involves', 'what's needed to constitute it'.<sup>5</sup> After some setup, he articulates this official formulation of his theory:

[A] person, M, has Christian faith in God if and only if M takes the Christian worldview to be true in practice, where so doing does *in fact* involve acting and living from an overall stance that accepts the truth of that worldview in the absence of independent empirical rational endorsement of its truth.<sup>6</sup>

This will have to be a necessarily true biconditional in order for it to express the 'nature' of Christian faith in God, and the rightward side will have to express necessary and jointly sufficient conditions that give us a deep understanding of Christian faith in God if it is to express the sort of theoretical understanding we seek from a theory of faith. Before examining Bishop's theory in detail, so understood, a big-picture comment is in order.

Looking to the leftward side of the biconditional, as expected, we see that Bishop intends to offer a theory about what it is for someone to have Christian faith *in God*. We might also expect, then, that what follows on the rightward side will tell us what it is for someone to be related to God in a particular way, namely, by their having faith in God. In this connection, consider an important distinction. Pistologists routinely distinguish propositional faith from relational faith. Propositional faith is the faith one has when one has faith that *p*, for some proposition *p*. Relational faith is the faith one has when one has faith in someone for something. Is the faith involved in each fundamentally the same sort of psychological phenomenon? We address that question elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> For now, note that Bishop draws the distinction, and he says that he means for his theory to be about relational faith, 'faith *in God*'.<sup>8</sup>

However, on the whole, his theory seems to be more about propositional faith, faith *that* the Christian worldview is true, not faith *in God*. After all, satisfying the theory's conditions only involves taking that worldview – a set of propositions – to be true in practice. True enough, according to Bishop, Christian faith in God involves living from an overall stance towards those propositions, a stance constituted by a 'positive [cognitive] propositional attitude' and a 'positive affective and/or evaluating state'.<sup>9</sup> But, on Bishop's theory, it's still only propositions to which one is related by way of Christian faith in God.

Think of it this way. Suppose that God exists. Now, when someone places their faith in God, they are thereby related to God, the person, just as when you place your faith in a friend or a spouse, you are thereby related to them, the person. But when someone 'takes the Christian worldview to be true in practice, where so doing [involves] acting and living from an overall stance that accepts the truth of that worldview', they are thereby related only to a set of propositions.<sup>10</sup> Propositions are not persons. Christian faith in God involves something more than being related to a set of propositions; it involves being related to a person, God.

Or does it? Bishop elsewhere argues that, contrary to what we just said, 'the act of commitment involved in Christian faith is not itself an interpersonal act, nor especially similar to such an act'.<sup>11</sup> Why not? Three reasons suggest themselves.

First, perhaps Bishop, like Aquinas, grants that God is the proper object of Christian faith in God but thinks that, in practice, the faith people put in God must be mediated by assent to propositions.<sup>12</sup>

Second, as we understand his 2014-argument, Bishop thinks that Christian faith in God is importantly disanalogous with trusting a human person in the following respect.

Whereas in the case of trusting a human person, it is so obvious that they exist there is no need for faith that they exist, God's existence is not so apparent, even to those who have faith in God. Rather, Christian faith in God requires accompanying propositional faith, including faith that God exists. Seen in this light, perhaps Bishop is better understood not as offering a theory of relational Christian faith in God, but a theory of the propositional faith that in his view 'underlies actions of trusting in God'.<sup>13</sup> We will return to this point in our discussion of *the underlying worldview reading* below.

Third, we suspect that, based on his more recent work with Ken Perszyk, there is another reason for resisting theorizing about Christian faith in God as trusting God – namely, that Bishop wants to leave room for a 'euteleological understanding of theism' according to which 'God is "no-thing" in euteleology's basic ontology' and in which 'no item identifiable as God appears in its fundamental ontology'.<sup>14</sup> Rather, 'reality is inherently purposive' and 'the Universe exists ultimately because its overall end (telos), which is the supreme good, is made concretely real within it. There is no supreme agent', indeed, there is no agent at all, in the extension of 'God'.<sup>15</sup> Bishop's understanding 'does not feature God as a supreme person or personal being'.<sup>16</sup> Unlike 'a move in a person-to-person relationship', performing the act of *taking* God to exist is, most fundamentally, 'to adopt a certain foundational *overall* interpretation' of reality and so, as Bishop sees it, 'there is then no *direct* implication from the nature of that act to the conclusion that the content of Christian commitment has to be understood as commitment to a (supreme) person'.<sup>17</sup> Given Bishop's rejection of God as in any way personal, perhaps it's not surprising that God falls out of the picture in his theory of relational Christian faith in God.

### Bishop's theory of Christian faith in God

Let's turn now to examine Bishop's characterization of the psychological state that his account of Christian *faith* in God calls to our attention. We will consider what appears on the rightward side of Bishop's biconditional in some detail, beginning with 'takes'.

According to Bishop, a person 'takes' the Christian worldview to be true in practice just when they 'employ' it 'as a premise in practical reasoning (whether consciously and deliberately or otherwise)'.<sup>18</sup> For you to take a worldview to be true in practice is to perform an act. Of course, someone might be fast asleep or wholly engaged in doing something other than using the Christian worldview as a premise in practical reasoning, but they don't thereby fail to have Christian faith in God. As Bishop observes, 'for M to have faith is for M to be in a certain *dispositional* psychological state'.<sup>19</sup> The theory, then, should be amended to reflect this fact by requiring not the use but a *disposition* to use the Christian worldview as a premise in practical reasoning.

Before moving on we flag a recurring concern, just illustrated, about discrepancies between the official statement of the theory, which sets out necessary and jointly sufficient constitutive conditions for Christian faith in God, and commentary elsewhere in the article which, for example, sets out further conditions as necessary that are not reflected in the official statement of the theory. If they are indeed necessary, they ought to be included. Several more of these discrepancies will emerge below.

### Pluralism about faith's resilience

Clearly enough, someone can be disposed to use the Christian worldview as a premise in practical reasoning only when doing so goes unchallenged by difficulties and, when the least sign of difficulty appears, they are no longer disposed to use it in that way. And this is so even when the taking involves 'acting and living from an overall stance that accepts the truth of that worldview in the absence of independent empirical rational

endorsement of its truth'.<sup>20</sup> By way of contrast, the Christian scriptures display something in the neighbourhood of perseverance in the face of difficulties as an essential property of such faith.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, in general, no one can have faith in anyone for anything unless they are at least somewhat disposed to overcome, or to try to overcome, difficulties in relying on them for it.<sup>22</sup>

Interestingly, in the commentary surrounding the official formulation of his theory, Bishop uses 'commit' and its cognates in the place of 'take' and its cognates, by a ratio of more than 12 to 1. One way for someone to take the Christian worldview to be true in practice is for them to perform the action of committing, by an act of will, to using – and thereafter being disposed to use – the propositions constitutive of the Christian worldview as premises in practical reasoning. Perhaps this is the primary way that Bishop has in view. Since someone might be disposed to employ a proposition as a premise in practical reasoning without committing to use it in that way, and since committing to use a proposition in that way involves at least some measure of stick-to-itiveness, perhaps putting the theory in terms of a practical *commitment* to the truth of the Christian worldview can avoid the problem. Unfortunately, it is just as clearly possible for someone to commit to employing the Christian worldview as a premise in practical reasoning only when their commitment goes unchallenged by difficulties and, when the least sign of difficulty appears, they are no longer committed in that way.

In addition, it is clearly possible to be resilient in the face of challenges to continuing to put faith in someone without making any commitment at all. In this connection, consider a number of characters to whom faith is attributed in the Gospels. Neither the woman who touches Jesus' cloak, nor the Canaanite woman whose daughter is tormented by a demon, nor the Roman centurion appear to make any commitment, although they are put forward as exemplars of Christian faith in God precisely because of their resilience in the face of challenges.<sup>23</sup> Commitment despite difficulties is one way – an important way – that a person who has placed faith in someone or something can be disposed to act with resilience in the face of challenges to continuing to do so. But it is not the only way.

We submit that Bishop's theory would better capture the target phenomenon were it to require a disposition to overcome difficulties in living from the overall stance posited by the theory. He seems to recognize the need for this addition when he notes in passing that 'worthwhile Christian faith involves *persistence* in practical commitment to the Christian worldview'.<sup>24</sup> But, again, 'commitment' won't cover all of the possible cases of Christian faith in God that need covering, and it seems that Christian faith in God can be had without it. We might add that the persistence in question does not need to dispose someone to overcome all possible challenges. They can be more or less persistent depending on the range of possible challenges to which they would respond by overcoming them (or trying to overcome them), and the degree of difficulty each poses. This is one way in which someone can have more or less Christian faith in God.

#### *Faith and doubt: pluralism about faith's positive cognitive attitudes and acts*

Now to 'accepts', as it occurs in the requirement that M 'accepts the truth of that worldview'.<sup>25</sup> Like many others, Bishop rightly distinguishes the propositional attitude of *acceptance* from the propositional attitude of *belief*.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, neither entails the other. However, in that case, the official formulation of the theory implies that, if you don't accept – but rather believe – the Christian worldview, then you lack Christian faith in God.

Thankfully, in the surrounding commentary, Bishop allows that you can have Christian faith in God even if you lack acceptance of the truth of the Christian worldview, provided that you have some other 'positive propositional attitude' of a cognitive sort towards its

truth, a familiar idea in the recent philosophical literature on faith.<sup>27</sup> One such attitude is belief that the Christian worldview is true. But, importantly, Bishop also allows that, if belief is the cognitive attitude you have towards it, you don't need to believe the 'thick' proposition that *the Christian worldview is true* or, even, the 'thinner' proposition that *it is more probably true than not*.<sup>28</sup> It suffices, he says, to 'judge that it would be practically rational' to commit to its truth, or to 'hold that it would be very good for reality to be Christianity's "God-way"'.<sup>29</sup> We welcome Bishop's sensibly relaxed view of these matters, in contrast to the views of those who idolize *propositional belief* of only *thick* propositions.<sup>30</sup>

We wonder whether pistologists should be even more relaxed. For we wonder whether Christian faith in God *necessarily* involves a positive cognitive *propositional* attitude towards the Christian worldview. Two sources feed our curiosity.

First, not all positive *cognitive* attitudes have propositional content, as ethologists remind us when they appeal to cognitive attitudes with imagistic content to explain intelligent animal behaviour, including much of the behaviour of normal human adults. If imagistic content can convey the Christian worldview – as it seems to do in venues as diverse as a children's Sunday School and a Hollywood studio, not to mention the art and iconography of the Church – then those who, for whatever reason, cannot represent it propositionally would lack Christian faith in God, on Bishop's theory, an unseemly implication in our view.

Second, might someone have Christian faith in God even if they had no positive cognitive attitude whatsoever towards God, the Christian worldview, or anything else, whether propositional, imagistic, or something else besides? In this connection, consider some intriguing possibilities, riffing on William McDonald's observation that, as Kierkegaard understands faith, 'the choice of faith is not made once and for all. It is essential that faith be constantly renewed by means of repeated avowals of faith'.<sup>31</sup> Imagine a creature who makes their way in the world not by forming and maintaining cognitive *attitudes* but by performing cognitive *acts*, for example, *judging* that something is true, or *assenting* to it. Here we might imagine two possibilities. The first is multiple, successive short-lived cognitive acts, akin to shaking hands in a handshake line, only much faster.<sup>32</sup> The second possibility is single long-lived cognitive acts, akin to shaking hands with someone for a long time, or umpiring a long baseball game, only much longer.<sup>33</sup> These possibilities raise some provocative questions. Might the cognitive act of judging that something is true, or assenting to its truth, be performed at the rate of, say, a hundred per second? Might the act of judging that something is true, or assenting to its truth, be performed continuously, say, for several decades? Perhaps the cognitive architecture of human beings won't allow these things. We don't know. But even if it doesn't, the cognitive architecture of other possible creatures might allow them.

Of course, no act is an attitude, and so no cognitive act is a cognitive attitude, and so Bishop's theory implies that creatures such as those we're imagining would be ineligible for Christian faith in God. So far as we can see, it's nothing but cognitive-attitude chauvinism that underwrites a ban on cognitive acts such as judging and assenting to satisfy the cognitive demands of Christian faith in God. This too is an unseemly implication in our view.

We hasten to add that not only Bishop's theory, but our own theory, as well as the theories of others, also imply such unseemly things. Perhaps all of us might benefit from reflection on these possibilities as we pursue our interests in doing pistology, specifically our interests in articulating a theory of Christian faith in God, one that specifies the 'nature' of that faith, what it 'essentially involves', 'what's needed to constitute it',<sup>34</sup> which, of course, should allow for the possibility of creatures with non-human psychologies, whether those creatures are actual or merely possible.

While Bishop's theory of Christian faith in God speaks of accepting 'the truth of [the Christian] worldview', he allows both believing that and accepting that it is 'more probably true than not', and he even allows believing that and accepting 'that it would be practically rational' to commit to its truth.<sup>35</sup> Notice that 'accept' can refer to a mental *act* or to a representational dispositional *attitude*. When Bishop speaks of acceptance, he has in mind Jonathan Cohen's view of acceptance, according to which, 'To accept that *p* is to have or adopt a policy of deeming, positing or postulating that *p* – i.e. of including that proposition . . . among one's premises for deciding what to do or think in a particular context, whether or not one feels it to be true that *p*.'<sup>36</sup> Cohen uses 'acceptance' that *p* to point both to (i) the act of 'adopting', or 'choosing', a policy to postulate *p* in reasoning, and to (ii) the 'having' of that policy.<sup>37</sup> These are different things.<sup>38</sup> The first is a mental act and the second is a representational dispositional attitude. Since Bishop treats acceptance as an instance of a non-doxastic 'positive propositional *attitude*', he apparently has the attitude primarily in mind. In what follows it will be our focus too.<sup>39</sup>

The difference between the attitude of believing the Christian worldview and the attitude of accepting the Christian worldview is twofold. First, while one cannot choose to believe it, one can choose to accept it and, second, the dispositional profile of belief differs from the dispositional profile of acceptance. According to Cohen, the dispositional profile of believing the Christian worldview is true consists *entirely* in a tendency to feel that it is true when brought to mind, for example, to feel sure, certain, or confident of its truth, while the dispositional profile of accepting it consists *entirely* in a tendency to use it in reasoning when appropriate.<sup>40</sup> Many of us would disagree, not least because believing the Christian worldview is true also involves a tendency to use it in reasoning and other behaviour when appropriate.

But, for present purposes, the most salient difference between believing the Christian worldview and accepting it, on Cohen's theory, consists in the fact that accepting it is compatible with assigning it a low probability while believing it is true is *incompatible* with assigning it a low probability.<sup>41</sup> William Alston used Cohen's theory of acceptance as a foil to construct his own theory of acceptance, but he, perhaps unwittingly, failed to import this feature of Cohen's theory into his own, as evidenced by, among other things, his claim that 'to accept that *p* is to regard it as true'.<sup>42</sup> As a consequence, Alston's theory lacked the resources to do what he intended, namely sketch a non-doxastic positive cognitive attitude available to the sceptical Christian, an attitude that is compatible with being in doubt about whether the Christian worldview is true. Bishop's theory of Christian faith in God relies on Cohen's theory of acceptance, not Alston's, and so it allows for the sceptical Christian while Alston's theory does not. Bishop's theory is better on this score, in our view.<sup>43</sup>

#### *Faith and the will: pluralism about faith's positive conative states and acts*

Bishop rightly says that Christian faith in God involves more than a 'propositional belief-disposition' or, more accurately, a 'positive propositional attitude' of a cognitive sort.<sup>44</sup> In addition, he says, it involves 'welcoming' the propositions that constitute the Christian worldview, 'approving their truth and having positive feelings towards' the God 'implicated in those propositions'.<sup>45</sup> We agree. More accurately, in our view, a person has Christian faith in God only if they have what we call a 'positive conative attitude' towards God's coming through with respect to whatever it is that they have faith in God for. There is a wide variety of ways in which a person might have such an attitude.

However, in his commentary on the nature of the commitment to living in accordance with the Christian worldview, Bishop unnecessarily restricts that variety. For he says that the commitment in question 'essentially involves' 'the mental action of *willingly* taking

certain propositions to be true in practical reasoning', that is, it 'essentially involves' an '*act of will* that takes [the Christian worldview] to be true in practical reasoning'.<sup>46</sup> This theme occurs elsewhere in his writings: 'Authentic faith needs to be freely chosen', he writes, and 'It is *up to agents themselves* whether they do or do not take' the Christian worldview 'to be true in their reasoning'.<sup>47</sup> What should we make of this?

Consider freedom first. Like Bishop, we too want a theory of faith which *allows* faith to be free. However, it is far less plausible that faith *must* be free – that it would be absolutely impossible to have faith except by a free choice. On the assumption that Bishop's theory of the nature of Christian faith in God is correct, it's plausible that 'freely choosing' to commit to live in accordance with the Christian worldview is a requirement of *meritorious* Christian faith in God, where the freedom in question involves its being 'up to the agents themselves' whether or not they take that worldview to be true in their practical reasoning. But Bishop's theory is not about the conditions under which Christian faith in God is meritorious. It's about what it is. We mustn't confuse the what-it-is question with the when-it-is meritorious question. As for the what-it-is question, we find nothing implausible about the possibility of someone *having* Christian faith in God in a theologically or causally deterministic world, and so not freely chosen, although it would be a hard pill to swallow to suppose it would be meritorious in that case. We advise against requiring freedom in a theory of what Christian faith in God is.

But what about committing by an *act of will*? We can commit by an act of will to live in accordance with the Christian worldview whether or not we do so freely. Perhaps committing by an act of will, whether freely or not, is essential to Christian faith in God. Let's look into the matter briefly.

Suppose we grant, just for the sake of argument, that Christian faith in God essentially involves a *disposition to live* in accordance with the Christian worldview. Now: notice that there are different ways in which one can be so disposed. One way is to willingly commit oneself to live in that way; another is to have a strong, overriding desire to live in that way; a third is to possess an overwhelming preference (under the right conditions) to live in that way. No doubt there are other ways.

However, one can desire and prefer without willingly committing. Our question, then, is this: is it really *necessary* to Christian faith in God that one willingly commits, rather than strongly desires or overwhelmingly prefers, to live in accordance with the Christian worldview? Why insist on this particular way, to the exclusion of other ways, of being disposed to live in accordance with the truth of the Christian worldview with resilience in the face of challenges to doing so?

In this connection, imagine Jesus calling James, son of Zebedee, to 'follow me' and James beginning to do so.<sup>48</sup> Let's suppose, just for the sake of argument, that Jesus has taken the time to articulate the Christian worldview to James and that, given what Jesus says, James firmly believes it. In addition, suppose that James has a strong, overriding desire to live in accordance with it, and that, given his desire, as well as his firm belief, he is disposed to do so, with resilience in the face of challenges. But suppose also that James has yet to perform *the act of willingly committing* himself to live in this way. Even so, he is disposed to live in accordance with the Christian worldview, with resilience in the face of challenges, due to his strong desire and firm belief. Do we really want to say that James *lacks* Christian faith in God?

Bishop seems to want to, but we don't. That's because we fail to see the motivation for the claim that, necessarily, one has Christian faith in God only if one *willingly commits* rather than strongly desires or overwhelmingly prefers to live in accordance with the Christian worldview. After all, on the supposition that Christian faith in God essentially involves a disposition to live in accordance with that worldview, what is important is living in accordance with it, and to be properly motivated in doing so, and one can be

properly motivated in doing so in many ways, only one of which is willingly committing to do so.

Indeed, we wouldn't be the least bit surprised if many cradle Christians, who have been nurtured within the tradition from an early age, are like James in this respect. They grow up in the church and have inculcated in them a strong desire to live in accordance with the Christian worldview that they believe, even though they have yet to perform the act of willingly committing themselves to living in that way. Perhaps they cannot recall a time at which they did not identify as a Christian, but neither can they point to a conversion experience, a 'born again' moment of the sort emphasized in American evangelical circles, or a time at which they made a commitment.<sup>49</sup> Of course, there may come a time when they do so and doing so is often encouraged within Christian communities, for example, in the practices of confirmation and/or adult baptism. But to suppose that, until then, they lack Christian faith in God is at odds with what is important about it.

But isn't every cradle Christian at least somewhat *disposed* to willingly commit themselves to act and live in accordance with the Christian worldview? We suspect not, but even if they are, Bishop's question of what is 'essential' to Christian faith in God requires us to consider not just actual people but merely possible creatures as well. In this connection, consider someone – whether James as imagined above, cradle Christians, or anyone else – who, for whatever reason, lacks a disposition to willingly commit themselves to live in accordance with the Christian worldview, although they are nevertheless disposed to live that way due to their strong desire and firm belief. We recommend against insisting that such people lack Christian faith in God. One can also be disposed to live in accordance with the Christian worldview, for the right reasons, with resilience in the face of challenges, even if one is not disposed to perform the act of willingly committing to live in that way.<sup>50</sup>

### *Relying: faith's characteristic act*

Bishop points out that a positive propositional attitude of a cognitive sort along with an approving state cannot 'adequately account for the *active and practical aspect* of Christian faith'.<sup>51</sup> We agree. But how, exactly, should we understand this crucial aspect? Bishop initially says that we should understand it in light of the fact that 'Judaean-Christian faith in God as characterized in scripture involves trusting God and being faithful to God in a covenantal relationship'.<sup>52</sup> Three observations are in order.

*Observation 1.* This is the only place in Bishop's commentary where he suggests that being faithful to God partly constitutes faith in God. But being faithful to God does not partly constitute faith in God. To suppose otherwise is like supposing that trustworthiness partly constitutes trust, or reliability partly constitutes reliance. Faith in God is one thing, faithfulness to God another; and neither entails the other. True enough, faith and faithfulness both share something important in common, something in the neighbourhood of perseverance, persistence, stick-to-itiveness, and resilience in the face of challenges. But that fact does not warrant supposing that faithfulness to God partly constitutes Christian faith in God. And, true enough, the semantic domain of both the Hebrew *ʾēmûnāh* lexicon and the Greek *pístis* lexicon contain both faith and faithfulness, trust and trustworthiness, and reliance and reliability, among other things. But neither does that fact warrant supposing that faithfulness to God partly constitutes Christian faith in God. For, as Teresa Morgan remarked at a session of the American Academy of Religion in November 2017, unlike ancient Hebrew and Greek, modern English lacks a single linguistic marker that has in its extension both faith and faithfulness. If contemporary English-speaking theologians want to point to both at once, then, for the sake of clarity in theorizing about faith and faithfulness, they would do better to follow those biblical scholars who, in their effort



to fill the gap in English, gerrymander 'faith' and 'faithfulness' into 'faith(fulness)' or 'faith/fulness', or some such construction.<sup>53</sup>

*Observation 2.* Bishop drops faithfulness and focuses exclusively on trust. That's a wise move, from our point of view. However, if he aims to specify the 'nature' of 'Christian faith in God', what's 'essential' to it, and if he is right that the scriptural characterization involves trusting God, then we would expect him to offer a theory that at least initially looks something like this: 'A person has Christian faith in God if and only if they trust the Christian God'. But he doesn't. Why? There seem to be two answers to our question in Bishop's writings. We will discuss each in turn.

According to the first answer, and contrary to what we just said, Bishop agrees that a person has Christian faith in God if and only if they trust the Christian God. After all, in the discussion preceding the official formulation of his theory, Bishop writes: 'I'm not denying that worthwhile Christian faith in God consists in actions of trusting God and following the way of the Christ'; rather, 'I'm claiming that these actions make sense only given something logically more fundamental'.<sup>54</sup> And what is that 'logically more fundamental' thing? 'To trust in God, or in God's commands and promises, one must be practically committed to its being true that there is a God (*this* God), who is to be trusted.'<sup>55</sup> All this suggests *the underlying worldview reading* of Bishop's theory of Christian faith in God. On that reading, a person has Christian faith in God if and only if they trust the Christian God, but a person trusts the Christian God *only if*, in the words of Bishop's official formulation, they take 'the Christian worldview to be true in practice', which involves 'acting and living from an overall stance that accepts the truth of that worldview in the absence of independent empirical rational endorsement of its truth'.<sup>56</sup>

The underlying worldview reading comes at a steep price. For Bishop's announced aim was to articulate a theory of 'Christian faith in God', one that specifies its 'nature', what it 'essentially involves', 'what's needed to constitute it'. However, on the underlying worldview reading, Christian faith in God is trust in the Christian God, and trust in the Christian God entails, *but is not entailed by*, the conditions specified in Bishop's official formulation. As a result, those conditions are *insufficient* for Christian faith in God, and so Bishop's announced aim goes unmet.

Now to the second answer to our question. Given his acknowledgement that Christian faith in God is characterized in scripture as trusting the Christian God, we asked why Bishop didn't characterize Christian faith in God as trusting the Christian God. On the second answer, he didn't do so because, by his lights, Christian faith in God is *not* an instance of trusting a person, and so we should replace trusting God with something else, specifically a practical commitment to the propositions that express the 'highest-order framing principles' of the Christian worldview.<sup>57</sup> Call this *the replacement reading* of Bishop's theory of Christian faith in God. Support for it includes the fact that Bishop's official formulation of his theory does not include trusting God, or anything like it, among its necessary conditions.<sup>58</sup> Further support picks up on the (alleged) disanalogies between Christian faith in God and trusting God. For example, Bishop argues elsewhere that 'the act of commitment involved in trusting in God may not be analogous enough to an act of trust in an interpersonal relationship for a convincing defense of faith in God to be founded on that analogy'.<sup>59</sup> And why is that?

One reason, he suggests, is that 'Faith in God seems to require *actually believing* there is a God worthy of ultimate trust' while trust does not.<sup>60</sup> But that's false, as Bishop himself asserts.<sup>61</sup>

Another reason he gives is that when we trust a human person, there's publicly available evidence to settle the question of their existence, at least in principle, whereas when we trust God, there is no publicly available evidence to settle the question of God's existence, not even in principle.<sup>62</sup> There is much to say here. We make one point. Even if there is no publicly available evidence to settle the question of God's existence, not even in

principle, why suppose that's a difference that's *relevant* to whether faith in God can be founded on analogy with trusting human persons? Not just any difference is a relevant difference. If a lack of publicly available evidence to settle the question of God's existence were to entail that no one could be disposed to rely on God for anything, that would be a relevant difference. But that's obviously not the case.

Finally, as we have already observed, in his recent work with Perszyk, Bishop thinks that, strictly speaking, God is not a personal being, nor, indeed 'a' being among other beings at all. If that's right, then our relationship with God is not an interpersonal relationship, and so Christian faith in God is not an instance of trusting a person – not even in part. While euteleological metaphysics allows us to think about our relation to God on *analogy* with trusting a person, it would be understandable if its proponents rejected theories of Christian faith in God which take it to be an instance of trusting a person. After all, Christian faith in God could be an instance of trusting a person only if God exists and God is personal.

However, we see no good reason at all to allow Bishop's euteleological metaphysics to call the shots on the question of what the 'nature' of Christian faith in God is, on what it 'essentially involves', on 'what's needed to constitute it', on whether Christian faith in God is an instance of trusting a person, let alone whether the analogy might be productive for theorizing about Christian faith in God. That's because we have a difficult time seeing what room euteleological metaphysics itself leaves for the existence of the Christian God, on which see more below.

In short, whatever Bishop's own assessment might be of the prospects for theorizing about Christian faith in God as trusting a person, we find nothing compelling in his writings to substantiate the idea that Christian faith in God cannot be an instance of trusting a person, or founded on analogy with trusting a person. And so we encourage other pistolologists who agree with Bishop, that in the Judaeo-Christian scriptures, Christian faith in God is characterized as *trust* in the Christian God, to engage with the growing literature on interpersonal trust, in philosophy, psychology, and elsewhere.<sup>63</sup>

However, not every theory of trust is suitable in a theory of Christian faith in God. After all, the trust in God exhibited in the Judaeo-Christian scriptures, not to mention the lives of everyday Christians for over 2,000 years, involves somehow relying on God in one way or another, and some theories of interpersonal trust on the market today entail that trust in a person never involves relying on anyone in any way whatsoever. Pistolologists who theorize about Christian faith in God in terms of trusting God would do well to exercise caution as they engage the trust-literature in an effort to understand how Christian faith in God relates to trust in God.<sup>64</sup>

*Observation 3.* Whatever the reason, Bishop's theory lacks a clear account of the act characteristic of relational faith in general, and of the act characteristic of Christian faith in God. In this connection, note that when you put your faith in someone for something, you somehow rely on them for it in one way or another. This explains why faith can be risky – because you might be mistaken about whether to rely on them. Moreover, it sheds light on why faith can make you vulnerable, because they might not come through with respect to what you rely on them for. In addition, it clarifies why a charge of faithlessness can stick, because if you have no tendency whatsoever to rely on someone for something when you should, you deserve to be upbraided for a lack of faith: 'have a little faith in me!' Further, it makes sense of what faithfulness is because when you are faithful to someone who has faith in you for something, you're disposed to come through reliably with respect to what they rely on you for.

Some pistolologists might want to use 'rely' as a stative verb in this context, merely denoting a state of dependence. We prefer to use 'rely' as an active verb here, denoting a non-basic action, one you perform by doing other things, such as relying on someone

as a personal trainer by following their advice and attending their sessions, or relying on Jesus as Lord by allowing him and what he stands for to guide you as you live your life. That's because faith implies action and the action characteristic of having faith in someone for something is relying on them for it. However, we must exercise caution here, as we indicated above. After all, you can have faith in someone for something even while you are not performing the act of relying on them for it, as when you retain your faith in God even while you are asleep or fully absorbed in doing something else. So, strictly speaking, performing the act of relying is not essential to faith, but rather a disposition to perform it.<sup>65</sup>

Bishop rightly says that 'faith essentially involves something actional' – faith implies action or, better, a disposition to act.<sup>66</sup> However, it's not any old disposition to action that faith implies. When you put your faith in God, the action to which you are thereby disposed is not, say, *coming through* for God with respect to what God relies on you to do. Coming through reliably is characteristic of faithfulness, not faith. So, when Bishop says that Christian faith in God involves a disposition to 'acting and living from an overall stance that accepts the truth of that worldview', we must restrict the actions to those that constitute the non-basic action of relying on God in one way or another. Otherwise, the theory won't capture what's distinctive of faith-expressive actions, as opposed to faithfulness-expressive actions. Of course, some actions might be expressive of both, but not all faith-expressive actions are like that. Thus, a theory of Christian faith in God must restrict the actions in the way indicated.

But it shouldn't restrict them too much. As we saw earlier, Bishop says that, on his theory, 'what's essential for a person to have faith is *the action* of taking relevant propositions to be true in practical reasoning (or, being disposed to do so)'.<sup>67</sup> No doubt, being disposed to perform the action of taking relevant propositions to be true in practical reasoning is one way in which someone might be disposed to perform the non-basic act of relying on God. However, it is not the only way. And it is most certainly not an 'essential' way. We can imagine people who have Christian faith in God, and so who are disposed to perform the act of relying on God, even though they lack the capacity to take the relevant propositions to be true in practical reasoning, either because they never developed that capacity or because they did but its exercise is systematically blocked for some reason. So long as there are some relevant relying-constituting actions to which a person is disposed, they can have Christian faith in God. They do not need to be disposed to the particular kind of relying-constituting act Bishop says is 'essential', namely '*the action* of taking relevant propositions to be true in practical reasoning'. Other relying-constituting actions will do just fine.

We have been investigating in this section Bishop's theory of the psychological nature of Christian *faith* in God. One difficulty that popped up repeatedly was *the problem of particularity*, namely, the problem of identifying as an 'essential' constituent of Christian faith in God some particular thing that is sufficient, but unnecessary, to play the role required by that constituent in Christian faith in God. Of course, in order to avoid the problem of particularity, we do not recommend that we just let anything play the role required by a constituent of Christian faith in God. Sometimes being specific is warranted. But we submit that all pistologists would do well to at least pay more attention to the problem of particularity as they frame their hypotheses about the exact nature of an essential constituent of Christian faith in God, not to mention faith more generally, including relational faith and propositional faith.

### **Bishop's theory of Christian faith in God**

A theory that aims to say what is 'essential' to *Christian* faith in God should be anchored in, or at least deeply engage with, canonical Christian texts in which such faith is exhibited

and commended. For unless we anchor our investigation into the nature of Christian faith in God to, among other things, a close reading of those texts – informed by semantic, historical, and cultural information related to them – we are much more likely to miss, and so to misrepresent, what is essential to it.

It's understandable that we don't find that sort of thing in Bishop's article. One can only do so much. Moreover, we do find at least some effort along these lines elsewhere.<sup>68</sup> However, it's worth pointing out that there remains a lot of work to be done on this score. After all, we might expect a pistologist focused specifically on *Christian* faith in God to consider how faith is understood, practised, and portrayed in the New Testament, where the *pístis* lexicon is used some 600 times. We might also expect them to explain how their theory sheds light on various features of faith as it shows up in the practice, commendation, criticism, and semantics of *pístis* in the Synoptics, or Paul's treatment of *pístis* in his undisputed letters, or the treatment of *pístis* by the author of Hebrews with their explicit connection of it with a variety of Hebrew exemplars of *ʾēmûnâh*. We might further expect them to engage recent scholarship on the influence of Graeco-Roman understandings and practices of *pístis* and *fides* in the culture surrounding the early churches, as well as Hebrew understandings and practices of *ʾēmûnâh*, such as its role in covenantal relationships. In Bishop's case in particular, we might expect them to discuss whether paradigms of *pístis* in the Synoptics meet the conditions he lays down for Christian faith in God, given that there arguably was no such thing as a Christian worldview at the time. We might also expect him to discuss his theory's exclusion from the circle of Christian faith in God of all those young children and unsophisticated adults in our own day, as well as the past 2,000-plus years, who can't grasp the propositions he sets out as its content. A more comprehensive evaluation of Bishop's theory of Christian faith in God, then, would assess the extent to which his theory can handle faith-data specific to the Christian biblical tradition, as well as the lives of many past and current Christians, and whether it can handle this data better than available alternatives.

In this connection, consider that there are many places in the Gospels in which Jesus attributes faith to someone and commends it – for example, those we mentioned earlier – and yet what Jesus commends does not seem to be best characterized by their taking the 'whole Christian worldview' to be true in practice. No commitments are expressed, whether to a worldview or otherwise. Such cases, we suggest, are more readily understood as a disposition to rely on Jesus, or on God through Jesus, to come through with respect to what they have faith in them for, with resilience in the face of challenges to doing so.

Moreover, there are also the conclusions of contemporary biblical scholars to engage with, including those of Teresa Morgan, the leading authority on the *pístis* lexicon in the first century. How might we square, on the one hand, Bishop's rejection of God as personal and his foregrounding of a worldview in his theory with, on the other hand, Morgan's extensively developed historical thesis that early Christian communities took relational trust to be at the core of their *pístis*-relationship to God and to Jesus and that something more propositional was less important than people might expect?<sup>69</sup> How might we reconcile Bishop's inclusion of an absence-of-public-evidence clause in his account of Christian faith in God with Morgan's observation that 'all the writers of the New Testament take some pains to explain (what they understand as) the firm bases on which people *písteuein*: whether direct encounter with Christ, witnessing of miracles, or experience of the power of the Spirit?'<sup>70</sup>

Furthermore, it is a consequence of Bishop's theory that, unless you take the Christian worldview to be true in practice, you couldn't possibly have Christian faith in God. But now consider the propositional content of the Christian worldview which, according to Bishop, a person must have a 'positive [cognitive] propositional attitude' towards in order to have Christian faith in God. Here it is:

[T]he entirety of what exists ('the Universe', with a capital 'U') constitutes a divine creation existing to fulfil divine purposes which (so far as humans need to know them) are revealed in human history, culminating in the life and teaching of Jesus the Christ, and continuing in the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church (the 'Body of Christ'). For humanity to be fulfilled (according to this Christian worldview) human wills must be aligned with the will of God, which may be summed up in Christ's 'new commandment' that we should love one another as he has loved us. For this to happen, individuals must be transformed away from their natural self-centredness to become participants in the 'kingdom' of justice, peace and love that Jesus proclaimed as already at hand among us but which, ultimately, is a sharing in God's eternal life.<sup>71</sup>

As Bishop notes, some will want to add to this, while others will want to subtract. Either way, Bishop insists that he is 'saying only that Christian faith is commitment to the truth of an overall worldview framing all one's experiences and interactions'.<sup>72</sup> We want to make three observations.

*Observation 1.* A picky point. Suppose you trim your toenails once a month, but you don't frame that experience by a commitment to the truth of the Christian worldview. Are you thereby ineligible for Christian faith in God? Well, if a commitment to 'framing all one's experiences and interactions' is a necessary condition for it, as Bishop emphasizes in the commentary, then you're ineligible. Fortunately, nothing in the official formulation of the theory requires such a commitment.

*Observation 2.* Bishop arguably sets the bar for the content of Christian *faith* in God too high. After all, the idea that taking on board something as grandly theoretical as 'the truth of a whole Christian worldview' is *necessary* for the content of such faith is extremely implausible. In his letters, Paul rests content with far simpler propositions. There we find: 'Because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and *pisteuses en* (faith in, trust in, believe in) your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.'<sup>73</sup> And in Acts, the suicidal jailer who asks Paul and Silas, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?', is told '*Pisteuson epi* (faith on, trust on, believe on) the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household'.<sup>74</sup> In addition, many Christians we have mixed with over the decades lack anything like 'the truth of a whole Christian worldview' as the content of their faith in God. Do we really want to infer that they *lack* Christian faith in God, as Bishop's theory requires?

Perhaps alive to this concern, Bishop observes that *not*

every Christian actually does think of it thus [i.e. think of Christian faith in God in the way he does], let alone is in possession of an articulation of an entire Christian worldview. *Typically*, I agree, Christians will simply think of themselves as trusting in God and following the way of the Christ. If I am right, though, it will be true that *reflective* Christians will recognize that their faith is founded on practical commitment to the truth of a whole Christian worldview . . .<sup>75</sup>

What should we make of this passage as a response to our concern?

Well, that depends on what 'their faith' refers to in the last sentence. Does it refer to the faith of *reflective* Christians, or does it refer to the faith of *typical* Christians?

If it refers to the faith of *reflective* Christians, then Bishop has changed the subject. For, at the outset, he announced that he meant to theorize about Christian faith in God. Period. Full stop. No restriction to reflective Christians was named. If, however, 'their faith' refers to the faith of *typical* Christians, then it is not enough to avoid the concern. After all, why suppose that, if 'reflective Christians' were to examine *every* Christian's

faith, they would find something ‘founded on practical commitment to the truth of a whole Christian worldview’?

*Prima facie* this appears to be an extraordinarily wide-ranging empirical claim about the inner states of all Christians, one that is predicted by Bishop’s theory, of course. But it is one for which he offers no empirical evidence. Indeed, it seems to be a prediction of his theory that is contradicted, as we suggested above, by characters in the biblical texts as well as all manner of Christians we have known, notably those who are unable to grasp, let alone affirm, ‘an entire Christian worldview’.

Perhaps, in accordance with the underlying worldview reading, Bishop thinks every Christian’s faith in God *logically entails* a practical commitment to ‘an entire Christian worldview’, whether they recognize it or not. But that won’t help with our concern. For no one can have a practical commitment to ‘an entire Christian worldview’ unless they can grasp it and affirm it, and plenty of Christians, past and present, are unable to grasp, let alone affirm, ‘an entire Christian worldview’.

*Observation 3.* Bishop arguably sets the bar for the content of the Christian *worldview* too low. We expect that Paul, for example, would explicitly include in its content the proclamation that Christ is risen, and we expect that Jesus, as well as the earliest churches, would also explicitly include in the content a personal God.

In this connection, notice that we might naturally read Bishop’s description of the Christian worldview as involving a personal God. After all, he speaks of the Universe as God’s *creation*, which God made according to God’s *purposes*, and of God’s *revealing* those purposes in the life and teaching of Jesus, and of our need to align our wills with the *will* of God, all of which involve personal attributions. However, it is important to note that Bishop and Perszyk take personal talk about God to involve ‘radical analogizing’. In fact, on their view, ‘radical analogizing’ is involved in all truth-claims ‘of the form “God is F” or “God  $\phi$ s”’, including ‘God exists’ and ‘the very thought of God as “a” thing, entity, or substance to which properties may be attributed’.<sup>76</sup> In this way, they aim to ‘preserve talk about God as conveying truths accepted by faith by appeal to the idea that God-talk involves a radically analogous extension of our mundane practice of attributing properties and actions to persons’.<sup>77</sup> Bishop thus intends for the description of the content of the Christian worldview to be compatible not only with the claim that God is not a personal being, but also with a euteological metaphysics according to which nothing ‘identifiable as God appears in its fundamental ontology’.

One might well think that, if there is nothing that is identifiable as God in the fundamental ontology of euteological metaphysics, then ‘God exists’, ‘God is omnipotent’, ‘God is omnibenevolent’, and ‘God is omniscient’, among other predications that use ‘God’ as a subject term in a sentence, are one and all false. Bishop argues otherwise. For, on his euteological metaphysics, sentences with ‘God’ as the subject term are ‘made true’ simply by the resources we find in the fundamental ontology of euteological metaphysics. Thus, for example, the sentence ‘God exists’ is ‘made true’ by

nothing less than the overall state of ultimate reality existing concretely as it does and having the highly general features articulated in euteology’s core claims – namely, being inherently directed upon the realization of reality’s telos, the supreme good, with the concrete contingent Universe existing ultimately just because it contains such realizations.<sup>78</sup>

Even simple subject-predicate sentences that attribute personal properties to God get their own euteological truth-makers. The sentence ‘God is omnipotent’ is ‘made true’ by ‘the fact that every power, and every exercise of power, exists for the sake of realizing the supreme good and only because that end is fulfilled’, while

the sentence ‘God is omnibenevolent’ is ‘made true’ by ‘reality’s eutelicity – its inherently aiming at realizing its telos, the supreme good’, and the sentence ‘God is omniscient’ is ‘made true’ by the fact that reality embodies ‘the “know-how” needed to fulfil the ultimate “project” of realizing the supreme good’.<sup>79</sup> Sentences describing divine creation *ex nihilo* are ‘made true’ by counting

every existent as ‘made’ in an analogically extended sense, given that it admits no ‘maker’ in the sense of an intentional agent who produces it. On a euteleological account, creatures manifest ‘the handiwork of their Maker’ in so far as their reality participates, in limited characteristic ways according to their kind, in reality’s overall inherent directedness upon the realization of the supreme good, and each creature is actual only because it belongs to a Universe in which that good is realized.<sup>80</sup>

Of course, this isn’t the place to delve into Bishop’s critique of the idea that the Christian God is personal, and its corollary that the Christian worldview must therefore make room for a revisionary euteleological metaphysics, among other possibilities.<sup>81</sup> However, the ‘radical analogizing’ he defends is relevant to the present discussion about what is or is not essential to ‘the Christian worldview’ insofar as other participants in the discussion might share our concern that Bishop’s proposed truth-makers are inadequate to what ‘the Christian worldview’ puts forward as the facts of the matter, or to the good news that Jesus and Paul proclaimed. In the context of the ongoing research programme that is contemporary pistology, its participants rightly expect that proponents of a candidate theory of Christian faith in God will explain how their theory fits with what the biblical texts portray about the nature, practice, and proclamation of such faith, and they rightly expect proponents of a candidate theory to explain why, *on this terrain*, participants should prefer their theory to others available in the literature. Otherwise the proposed theory will be less likely to deserve the appellation of *Christian faith in God*.

### Christian faith in God, evidence, and moral permissibility

We now turn to some normative matters. We begin with the last clause in Bishop’s theory, according to which it is *absolutely impossible* for a person to have Christian faith in God unless they have a positive cognitive attitude towards the truth of the Christian worldview ‘in the absence of independent empirical rational endorsement of its truth’.<sup>82</sup> Why should we suppose that to be true? Why should we suppose that *only* ‘in the absence of independent empirical rational endorsement of its truth’ is it *possible* for someone to be eligible for Christian faith in God?

We find the requirement extremely implausible, so much so that we feel compelled to note that it is not merely an infelicitous consequence of the wording in the official formulation of his theory. Bishop clearly intends to ‘build’ the idea of accepting and/or believing truth-claims ‘beyond what’s rationally required on the available evidence . . . into faith’s very essence’.<sup>83</sup> To underscore the claim, he writes: ‘having faith *entails* accepting in practice truth-claims open to doubt because their public-evidence-based epistemic justifiability is not secured’.<sup>84</sup> Elsewhere, he expresses this condition by saying that we can have Christian faith in God only *in the absence of*

- confirmation by ‘intersubjectively checkable empirical methods – of sense perception and the scientific theorizing based upon it’,
- sufficient ‘shared available evidence’ for the Christian worldview,

- a ‘rational practice that delivers, from an initial neutral starting point, the endorsing judgment that one ought to make such a commitment’ to its truth,
- ‘what widely shared rational empirical methods could show to be rationally required on all the available evidence’,
- evidence that renders it ‘rationally required according to our shared rational empirical methods’,
- ‘publicly available evidence’ that can ‘settle’ the matter, and
- what can ‘in principle be shown to be epistemically justified by appeal to the available evidence according to widely shared, publicly checkable, intersubjective rational norms’.<sup>85</sup>

Perhaps it doesn’t matter to Bishop which one of these inequivalent items the absence of which he requires for Christian faith in God. In what follows, we will stick with ‘shared [publicly] available evidence’ for the most part.<sup>86</sup>

So then: is it *possible* for someone both to have Christian faith in God while also having enough shared available evidence to accept and/or believe, in an epistemically rational fashion, the truth of the Christian worldview? Bishop says no. We wonder whether that’s the right answer.

After all, imagine a woman named ‘Jane’ who, along with all her fellows, exists in a world unlike ours, a world in which everyone routinely experiences second-personal union with God, which is formally structured in just the way their second-personal union with their fellows is formally structured.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, the second-personal union with God they each enjoy is as clear and evident to them as the second-personal union with each other that they enjoy. They are aware of God as a person and their interactions with God are of a direct and immediate sort.<sup>88</sup> Naturally enough, they each learn of each other’s experiences of second-personal union with God, and in quite a bit of detail, just as they learn of each other’s experience of second-personal union with their fellows. That’s because they talk to each other and listen to each other and thereby learn from each other. Within the context of these multiple, routine second-personal unions with God – which everyone has experienced for tens of thousands of generations, and nobody remembers anybody not experiencing – God vouchsafes to each of them ‘value-laden claims about ultimate reality, its purposiveness, and the place of human nature and its flourishing within those ultimate purposes, which belong to the Christian worldview’.<sup>89</sup> Of course, they each learn of each other’s revelatory experience, and they do so in the usual way. They talk and listen to each other.

Let’s leave aside Jane’s own revelatory experience. That’s private evidence and not shared public evidence. Even so, she still has the evidence of all her fellows sharing their revelatory experiences with her. Moreover, she has their shared reminder that she reported to them her own experience of God vouchsafing these value-laden items to her. (Their reminder is shared public evidence even if her revelatory experience itself is not.)

So then, in the scenario described, does Jane have enough shared available evidence to make it epistemically rational for her to *accept* the value-laden claims? It seems so. After all, given Cohen’s characterization of acceptance, which Bishop takes on board in his theorizing about Christian faith in God, she can accept that they are true in an epistemically rational fashion even if her shared available evidence renders her epistemically rational in assigning only a *low* probability to them. And what if we take seriously Bishop’s suggestion that a person who has Christian faith in God might accept the value-laden items not *as true* but only *as more likely than not to be true* or even only *likely enough for them to act on*? In that case, it seems, Jane can accept that they are more likely than not to be true or likely enough for her to act on even if her shared available evidence renders her



epistemically rational in assigning only a *much lower* probability to them. *Mutatis mutandis*, we can easily imagine that the same can be said for the non-value-laden claims of the Christian worldview.

It appears, therefore, that, contrary to what Bishop says, it is possible for someone – say, Jane – to have sufficient shared available evidence to *accept*, in an epistemically rational fashion, that the Christian worldview is true, or more likely than not, or likely enough for her to act on. Bishop might relent, and agree that it is possible, and yet deny that Jane has Christian faith in God, just as his theory implies. But again, why would *that* – namely, having sufficient shared available evidence to *accept*, in an epistemically rational fashion, the Christian worldview – preclude Jane from having Christian faith in God? After all, we can imagine that she satisfies whatever other sensible conditions there might be on such faith.

Perhaps Bishop won't like the Jane example on the grounds that, 'interpreting any experience as conveying divine messages requires going beyond what could non-question-beggingly be settled on the basis of evidence'.<sup>90</sup> Even if that's true, it's irrelevant. That's because our present concern has to do with whether Jane has enough evidence to *accept* the Christian worldview, not enough evidence to *settle* whether it is true. Accepting and settling are not the same thing, and accepting does not entail settling.

Alternatively, Bishop might not like the Jane example on the grounds that, necessarily, God is not in any way personal, and so there could not possibly be second-personal union with God of the sort we imagine. However, if that's the tack he takes, he will not have given those who are as yet unpersuaded by his euteleological metaphysics, or any other purely non-personal characterization of the Christian God, a reason to dismiss the possibility of Jane.

In any event, for those of us who have no problem thinking of God as personal, a comparison with trust is instructive here. If you think about having Christian faith in God as similar in key respects to trusting someone for something, the lack-of-publicly-available-evidence requirement looks implausible. After all, it is not *impossible* to trust someone for something while also having excellent publicly available evidence for their trustworthiness. Indeed, they would be among those most evidently worthy of trust. But then, why include a lack-of-publicly-available-evidence clause in an account of the nature of Christian faith in God?

In addition to offering a theory of the nature of Christian faith in God – an answer to the descriptive 'what-is-it?' question – Bishop specifies the conditions under which such faith can be reasonable, rational, or moral, all of which repay close attention. Like William James, Bishop thinks that, in special circumstances, accepting and/or believing beyond what the evidence supports can nevertheless be morally and epistemically permissible.<sup>91</sup> This is true only if the epistemological theory known as *evidentialism* is false, an implication that Bishop affirms.<sup>92</sup> If Bishop is right, then, from the point of view of contemporary epistemology, it would be most unfortunate. For, as Andrew Chignell points out, 'Evidentialism of some sort is far and away the dominant ethic of belief among early modern and contemporary philosophers alike'.<sup>93</sup> We wonder: wouldn't it be better, *all else being equal*, if a theory of the nature of Christian faith in God is compatible with what is 'far and away the dominant ethic of belief among early modern and contemporary philosophers alike'? It seems so.<sup>94</sup>

In this connection, recall that, according to Bishop, Christian faith in God requires a positive cognitive attitude towards the Christian worldview, which might be *belief* that the Christian worldview *is true*, but it doesn't have to be. As we've already indicated, he thinks that's not the only option. He allows that, when the positive cognitive attitude is belief, it does not need to be belief that the Christian worldview is true; belief that *it is more likely than not* is just fine as well as belief that *it is likely enough to act on*.

Moreover, he allows that the positive cognitive attitude does not have to be belief, it can be acceptance and, on Cohen's theory of acceptance which Bishop endorses, one can accept that the Christian worldview is true even though one assigns it a *low probability*. These much thinner contents and this more epistemically lenient positive cognitive attitude, both of which are allowed by Bishop's own theory, seem to be well-suited to meet the demands of evidentialism. After all, it wouldn't take much in the way of publicly available evidence in order for it to fit such low probability assignments. So we suggest that, on Bishop's own theory, the resources are available to avoid conflict with 'the dominant ethic of belief among early modern and contemporary philosophers alike', if Bishop would only avail himself of them.

We now turn to our concerns about the conditions Bishop lays down for morally permissible Christian faith in God. We can put it in the form of a simple argument. According to Bishop, Christian faith in God is morally permissible *only if* the question of whether the Christian worldview is true is 'essentially evidentially undecidable'.<sup>95</sup> But, as it seems to us, the Christian worldview is *not* 'essentially evidentially undecidable'. If both of us are right, it follows that Christian faith in God is morally impermissible. Readers who agree with our second premise must then either affirm the conclusion or reject Bishop's first premise.

Here are some initial considerations in favour of our second premise. Even if it is true that, given 'the limitations of human cognition' as they in fact are, and given the 'limitations in the purported evidence' as it in fact stands,<sup>96</sup> the Christian worldview is *in fact* undecidable on the publicly available evidence, it does not follow that it is essentially evidentially undecidable. After all, is it not possible, *in principle*, for someone to lack those limitations, or to have them mitigated significantly, so that, unlike us, they have enough shared available evidence to decide the matter? In this connection, consider the following three cases.

Case 1: *The Historical Jesus*. Suppose that Jesus of Nazareth never existed and that tales about him were originally woven together by a group of storytellers. In that case, the storytellers would have had enough evidence against the claim that he was a real person to decide the matter. And the same goes for lifetime residents of Nazareth, a small village; they too would also have had decisive evidence for the same conclusion, grounded in straightforward observation, memory, testimony from others, and the like. Even if you think that now, as a contingent matter of fact, the opportunity to refute the claim that Jesus of Nazareth was a real person has been lost to history, it doesn't look to be the sort of claim that is essentially evidentially undecidable. Moreover, the proposition that *Jesus was a historical figure* is essential to the content of any Christian worldview 'culminating in the life and teaching of Jesus the Christ', as Bishop nicely puts it.<sup>97</sup>

Interestingly, Bishop considers whether Christianity could survive decisive evidence establishing that Jesus was a purely mythical non-historical figure:

The existence of any of the historical prophets is certainly falsifiable – even if it is, on current evidence, reasonable to take it to be *verified*. If, to take an imaginary example, it should ever be established that Jesus was a purely mythical figure, orthodox Christian belief would then be falsified. The discovery of decisive evidence for Jesus's non-existence would not, of course, falsify classical theism – nor even certain revisionary forms of Christianity for which a mythical Jesus (invented perhaps by St Paul?) might be enough.<sup>98</sup>

Here Bishop grants that *Jesus was a historical figure* is a proposition that is empirically falsifiable and/or verifiable, at least in principle. If, in accordance with orthodox Christian teaching, that proposition is part of the essential content of the Christian worldview, then evidence could in principle falsify the Christian worldview, in which case it is *not* essentially evidentially undecidable after all.

Perhaps Bishop would disagree. After all, on his understanding of the Christian worldview, it can survive God's not being personal, or 'any kind of entity in the underlying ontology' for that matter.<sup>99</sup> So maybe it could also survive after-the-bomb scenarios such as publicly available evidence establishing Jesus as a 'purely mythical non-historical figure'. Of course, one could cling for quite some time to a revisionary form of the Christian worldview that denied these things, retaining consistency by making revisions in one's 'web of belief' that drained it of empirical content.<sup>100</sup> But if Bishop maintains his view that, in principle, the Christian worldview is essentially evidentially undecidable, in this fashion – that is, by removing anything that could be, in principle, evidentially decidable by publicly available evidence – at some point one has to wonder whether it qualifies as Christian anymore.

Case 2: *The Starry Messenger*. Suppose that the stars in the visible band of the Milky Way suddenly align to spell out 'I, God, hereby confirm that all of those empirical details and value-laden claims in the Christian worldview are true'. Might not we then have enough publicly available evidence for a best available explanation argument to the conclusion that the Christian worldview is true? Under these circumstances wouldn't the Christian worldview enjoy evidential support that is at least as strong as the current historical evidence in light of which Bishop sees it as 'reasonable to take it to be verified' that Jesus of Nazareth was a real historical person?<sup>101</sup> If that's not enough, suppose that on subsequent nights the stars continue to rearrange so as to display each book of the New Testament. Would that be enough? Of course, we can keep on adding marvels like these.

It's not that we cannot imagine coherent alternative naturalistic explanations in this case, such as the simulation hypothesis, or alternative supernatural explanations, such as the activity of a pantheon of capricious gods. Nor are we assuming that extraordinary claims are not in need of extraordinary evidence. Nor are we assuming that in such a case we should all be absolutely certain of the truth of the Christian worldview. Nor are we denying that the step from the observations in question to the conclusion that God is the most likely source involves further interpretation. The point is rather that it strikes us as implausible to deny that there could come a point at which, by ordinary standards of reasonability and confirmation, there should be enough publicly available evidence such that the Christian worldview is evidentially decidable. Bishop thinks that, in fact, the 'Lockean approach' has failed. The publicly available evidence is not such that it 'requires us to accept the authoritativeness of the Christian sources'.<sup>102</sup> But did it *have to fail, in principle*? It seems to us that, in principle, the evidence *could* accumulate to a point that it would be just as reasonable to decide in favour of the Christian worldview as it is to decide in favour of many well-supported historical and scientific claims.

Case 3: *The Tiny Corinthian Community*. Perhaps the sticking point is that the value-laden claims are so hard to confirm.<sup>103</sup> We've already raised the possibility, in principle, of getting at those claims indirectly, whether via inference to the best available explanation or via second-personal interactions with God. Alternatively, imagine the possibility that reliable sense perception, memory, and testimony gave us the content of 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 with no value-laden claims at all. Just let that be the content of Christian faith in God, as Paul seemed to suggest. Why couldn't someone have Christian faith in God in that case?

Bishop might reply that the value-laden claims are essential to the content of the Christian worldview. But others need not simply defer to him on that score. Moreover, on what basis could someone who thinks that the Christian worldview can survive after-the-bomb scenarios like Case 1, or there not being a personal God, insist that the value-laden claims are essential to the content of the Christian worldview?

The people in any of Cases 1–3 would have decisive publicly available evidence for or against the Christian worldview and so, it seems to us, the Christian worldview is *not* essentially evidentially undecidable. If we're right, then, given Bishop's premise that Christian faith in God is morally permissible *only if* the question of whether the Christian worldview

is true is essentially evidentially undecidable, Christian faith in God is morally impermissible. By our lights, therefore, Bishop's view leads to the conclusion that it is always and everywhere wrong for anyone to have Christian faith in God – an unqualified moral generalization rivalled in scope perhaps only by the principle articulated by William James's stalking horse, W. K. Clifford. One might, then, see in Bishop's view the resources for a new argument against the moral permissibility of Christian faith in God. We suggest instead, however, that Christian faith in God can be morally permissible even if the question of whether the Christian worldview is true is, in principle, evidentially decidable.

Having run Bishop's most recent theory of Christian faith in God through the meat grinder, is there sausage yet to be made? We are glad to say that we think there is.

### People of Christian faith/fulness

Let's return to the distinction between relational faith and propositional faith. We argued that, contrary to Bishop's announcement, his theory of Christian faith in God is not a theory of relational faith but of propositional faith. But perhaps we were wrong on that score. That's because in addition to faith-in and faith-that, there is being a person of faith. A *person of faith* is someone who, like the Apostle Paul, is disposed to rely on a religious outlook to structure, govern, and unify their lives, and who devotes themselves to a way of life associated with that outlook, for example, by defending and championing it, or embodying it well. We find something like this phenomenon in the irreligious as well. Madalyn Murray O'Hair and Richard Dawkins both display it when, having taken on scientific naturalism early in their lives, they rely on that grand narrative to inform and shape their plans and projects, and they express their devotion to it by defending it and championing it, and by working on behalf of its practical, social, and political implications, all of which bestows on their lives unity and purpose. They are people of secular faith.

We propose that what distinctively characterizes people of faith – the nature of their particularly impressive reliance and devotion, whether they are people of religious or secular faith – can be usefully regarded as an admixture of faith and faithfulness. Since faith is importantly distinct from faithfulness, we suggest that it is more perspicuous to use the label *people of faith/fulness*, to convey that admixture. There are hints in Bishop's text that suggest he aims to be theorizing about being a person of Christian faith/fulness. For, among other things, he speaks of a person living from something like a life-encompassing, 'overall stance' towards the Christian worldview, a person who 'frames' their experience in light of that stance, and a person who not only puts their faith in the Christian God but is faithful to the Christian God as well.

Suppose we take it to be Bishop's aim to give a theory of what it is to be a person of Christian faith/fulness. Suppose further that we take to heart the concerns that we have expressed about the official formulation of his theory, as well as the commentary surrounding it. In that case, we might end up with something like this:

For someone, M, to be a person of Christian faith/fulness is for there to be something distinctively Christian – for instance, the Christian worldview or grand narrative, or Jesus or the Christian God or the Christian Church, or some combination of these – such that M is both disposed to rely on it and to come through reliably for it in such a way that M governs, structures, and unifies their life around it, with resilience in the face of challenges to doing so, because of M's overall positive stance towards it,

where that stance consists of both a positive cognitive and positive conative response to it, and the exact nature of those responses will vary according to what, more exactly, the object

of faith and faithfulness is, whether it is propositions, a grand narrative, a person, some combination of these, or something else besides. We might usefully label the faith of a person of faith/fulness *orientational faith* and their faithfulness *orientational faithfulness*.<sup>104</sup>

Notice that the proposed alternative is well suited to avoid our concerns. This strikes us as the most compelling and defensible theory in the neighbourhood of Bishop's effort to offer a theory of Christian faith in God.

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## Notes

1. 'The Will to Believe' was originally published in 1886. The quotation from Clifford's essay, 'The Ethics of Belief', can be found in his collected essays (Clifford (1886), 175).
2. Bishop (2022).
3. *Ibid.*, 2, 6.
4. Bishop (2007), 165.
5. Bishop (2022), 2, 4.
6. *Ibid.*, 6, his emphasis.
7. See McKaughan and Howard-Snyder (*in press a*).
8. Bishop (2022), 3, his emphasis.
9. *Ibid.*, 3, 8, 12.
10. *Ibid.*, 6.
11. Bishop (2014), 170.
12. Cf. Aquinas *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, 1, 2 (Aquinas 1265–1273 [2006], 11 and 13), cited in Bishop & McKaughan (2022).
13. Bishop (2022), 4, his emphasis.
14. Bishop and Perszyk (2023), 96.
15. *Ibid.*, abstract.
16. *Ibid.*, 59 their emphasis; cf. 3, 142.
17. Bishop (2022), 170.
18. Bishop (2022), 3; cf. *Idem* (2007), 23.
19. Bishop (2022), 2.
20. *Ibid.*, 6.
21. For defence, see Howard-Snyder (2017b) and McKaughan and Howard-Snyder (*in press b*).
22. For defence, see Howard-Snyder and McKaughan (2022b).
23. Mark 5:25–34; Matthew 15:21–28; Luke 7:1–10.
24. Bishop (2022), 7.
25. *Ibid.*, 6.
26. *Ibid.*, 8.
27. *Ibid.*, 8, 12.
28. *Ibid.*, 7; cf. 5.
29. *Ibid.*, 7.
30. Over the years, Bishop has become more relaxed about the role that 'sub-doxastic' attitudes might play in faith. Cf. Bishop (2002), 471; *Idem* (2005), 447, 449–450; *Idem* (2007), 120, 124–5; *Idem* (2022), 7–8; Bishop and McKaughan (2022).
31. McDonald (2023).

32. According to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, on 14 January 1996, during the Trade Fair at Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, India, Yogesh Sharma shook hands with 31,118 different people in eight hours. [www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/65485-most-handshakes-by-an-individual-in-eight-hours](http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/65485-most-handshakes-by-an-individual-in-eight-hours).
33. In 2016, CBS reported that Matt Holmes and Juan Diaz De Leon broke (what was then) the record for the longest handshake. They shook hands for 43 hours and 45 minutes. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lw19jj-gACo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lw19jj-gACo) And, Dennis Cregg umpired a game between the Rochester Red Wings and the Pawtucket Red Sox that began at 8.25 p.m. on 18 April 1981, and was stopped on 19 April, at 4:07 a.m., at the end of thirty-two innings. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Longest\\_professional\\_baseball\\_game](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Longest_professional_baseball_game).
34. Bishop (2022), 2, 4.
35. *Ibid.*, 7.
36. *Ibid.*, 8; Cohen (1992), 4.
37. Cohen (1989), 370.
38. As Alston (1996, 8–10) pointed out.
39. In an earlier work, Bishop treated acceptance exclusively as a mental act and denied that it is a propositional attitude (Bishop (2007), 34–35, n. 12). In Bishop (2022), he allows that there is the attitude in addition to the act, just as Cohen and Alston did. We think this is a wise move on his part.
40. Cohen (1992), 4–5, 7–8, 12.
41. Cohen (1989), 376.
42. Alston (1996), 11; cf. Bishop (2007), 34–35 n. 12.
43. Howard-Snyder (2017a) exhibits how Alston aimed to describe acceptance in such a way that it allowed for the sceptical Christian, explains how he failed to achieve that aim, and offers an alternative that does achieve it: *beliefless assuming*. Cf. Howard-Snyder (2019), 122–124.
44. Bishop (2022), 3, 8, 12.
45. *Ibid.*, 3.
46. *Ibid.*, 7, our emphasis.
47. Bishop (2007), 111 n. 19, his emphasis.
48. Mark 1:19.
49. See George Mavrodes' (1994) spiritual/intellectual autobiographical essay for the kind of case we have in mind.
50. This objection also applies to views put forward by other pistologists, e.g., Buchak (2012, 234) and Malcolm and Scott (2023, 130–131, 136).
51. Bishop (2022), 3.
52. *Ibid.*
53. For much more detail on this point, see McKaughan and Howard-Snyder (2022a).
54. Bishop (2022), 4.
55. *Ibid.*
56. *Ibid.*, 6.
57. *Ibid.*, 15 n. 2; cf. Bishop (2007), 122–150.
58. Bishop (2022), 6.
59. Bishop (2014), 170.
60. *Ibid.*, 167, his emphasis.
61. See Bishop (2007) and (2022).
62. Bishop (2014), 167–168.
63. For a critical review of the psychological literature on trusting God, see Hook et al. (2021).
64. We make an effort in that direction in McKaughan and Howard-Snyder (2022b), as does Simpson (*in press*).
65. See Howard-Snyder and McKaughan (*unpublished*) for our take on the act of relying to which faith disposes a person.
66. Bishop (2022), 3–4, 8.
67. *Ibid.*, 8, his emphasis.
68. Bishop (2007), 170–173, reflects on Abraham's faith. For alternative takes on Abraham's faith, see Pace and McKaughan (2022) and Howard-Snyder and McKaughan (2022b).
69. Morgan (2015); see also Morgan (2018b), 598–599.
70. Morgan (2018a), 567.
71. Bishop (2022), 4.
72. *Ibid.*, 5.
73. Romans 10:9. We propose to verbalize the noun 'faith' by 'faihte', on analogy with 'bath' and 'bathe'.
74. Acts 16:26–31.
75. Bishop (2022), 5, emphasis added.

76. Bishop and Perszyk (2023), 89, 102–103.
77. *Ibid.*, 58.
78. *Ibid.*, ch. 4, sect. 11.
79. *Ibid.*, ch. 4, sect. 10.
80. *Ibid.*, 98–99.
81. See *ibid.*, ch. 1.
82. Bishop (2022), 6.
83. *Ibid.*, 9.
84. *Ibid.*, 6–7, his emphasis.
85. *Ibid.*, 5–6.
86. In earlier writings, Bishop expresses the condition more broadly, implying that a person has Christian faith in God only in the absence of their *total available evidence* supporting the Christian worldview, which would include their private evidence as well as the publicly available evidence (Bishop (2007), 107).
87. See the literature on interpersonal knowledge which, in the philosophy of religion, is well-represented by Stump (2010) and Benton (2018).
88. Cf. Stump (2010), 112.
89. Bishop (2022), 5.
90. Bishop (2007), 172; cf. *Idem* (2014), 168.
91. As Bishop notes (2022, 15 n. 2), James (1896) proposes that accepting and/or believing beyond what the evidence requires is morally and epistemically permissible only when we face ‘a “genuine option” (“living, forced and momentous”)’. For extensive defence of a version of fideism, see Bishop (2007), 122–165, culminating in the thesis ‘J+’ (*ibid.*, 165). Cf. Bishop (2002).
92. Bishop (2022), 13–15.
93. Chignell (2018).
94. For candidates, see Howard-Snyder and McKaughan (*in press*); Buchak (2012); Howard-Snyder (2013); Jackson (2021); McKaughan (2013), (2016).
95. Bishop (2007), 165. This is one of four necessary conditions which he takes to be jointly sufficient for the moral permissibility of Christian faith in God.
96. Bishop (2022), 5.
97. *Ibid.*, 4.
98. Bishop (2007), 69 n. 17, his emphasis.
99. Bishop and Perszyk (2023), 88.
100. This puts in mind Quine’s (1951, 40, 43) example of a man who, when faced with recalcitrant experiences apparently refuting his claim that there are brick houses on Elm Street, finds a way to avoid giving it up. But he does so only by adjusting his web of belief elsewhere so that he alters what ‘brick’ means, thereby maintaining his claim in a manner that invites questions about the reasonability and moral permissibility of doing so.
101. Bishop (2007), 69 n. 17.
102. Bishop (2022), 5.
103. *Ibid.*, 4.
104. For more on being a person of faith/fulness, see McKaughan and Howard-Snyder (*in press a*) and (2022a).

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