Truth and Longing:

An Inquiry into the Epistemology of Religious 'Belief'

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Abstract

William Alston has written that religious belief is justifiable because it is based upon epistemic practices similar to those justifying belief in sensory facts. In this paper I argue for a different understanding of religious belief. What is called for in religious belief is not affirmation of factual truth-claims but fidelity to God. The significance and validity of creedal formulae lie in their capacity to elicit and express such fidelity, not in their factual and/or informational character. My paper endeavors to address four fundamental questions with respect to religious belief: 1. What is a religious belief? 2. What is the basis upon which one should adopt a religious belief? 3. What is the relation between belief and salvation/sanctification? 4. What attitude should one adopt toward alternate belief systems? I argue that these questions are best answered when we recognize the radical dissimilarity of creedal formulae to empirical truth-claims.

I. Introduction

Much of what is called 'epistemology of religion' often seems an attempt to defend the legitimacy of religious belief against epistemological methodologies (mainly empiricism) that leave little room for it. William Alston's notion of 'doxastic practice' as developed in his book *Perceiving God*, is a good example. This criterion suggests that any well-established system of beliefs is justified on that basis alone; i.e., because it is well-established. But even if we accept this idea, what do we learn from such a theory? Certainly not that all established belief systems are 'true,' in the sense of corresponding to reality. A quick review of the mutually irreconcilable claims of different religions suffices to dispel that notion. What then? What good is an epistemological theory that doesn't allow us to judge between irreconcilable claims? Alston's theory seems to have a purely defensive function. Given Alston's criterion, the religious devotee can feel 'justified' in his or her belief – but the specific value or even meaning of such justification remains unclear.

If we wish to penetrate more deeply, and understand what *kind* of legitimacy religious belief systems have, we have to venture into areas that challenge the distinction between philosophy and theology. This is especially true in the case of Christianity, where an intricate relationship exists between the ideas of 'truth', 'faith,' and 'salvation.' How are we to understand this relationship? This is as much a theological as an epistemological question, and we cannot address the latter without, in some degree, addressing the former.

Let us consider four questions.

First: What is a religious 'belief'? Is it the acceptance that certain facts (such as Christ's resurrection) are true? This would be a problematic understanding of 'belief' for two reasons. First, if such acceptance is to be based on evidence, then religious belief would have to be as tentative as the evidence itself. On the other hand, if not based on evidence – what then? It seems unreasonable of God to hinge salvation upon one's willingness to affirm as true claims that can in no way be known to be true. The value of honesty itself would seem to demand that one have the freedom and right to say of an uncertain truth-claim that it is uncertain. Can salvation be had apart from honesty?

Second: What is the specific relationship between belief and salvation? Is it a strictly extrinsic affair? Does God grant salvation, as a kind of prize, to whomever happens upon the correct belief? Is the *content* of the belief independent of its saving power – or is its salvific efficacy intrinsically related to the content itself?

Third: What is the *basis* upon which one should adopt a given belief? Should one do a detailed study of all the religions to find the one most plausible? Should one simply adopt whatever belief 'feels' right? Should one never stray from one's parent's beliefs, whatever they may be? Should one appeal to some authority? If so, what authority and why that one as opposed to another?

Finally: What of other belief systems? Is it really the case that God punishes people for adopting (or inheriting) one set of unverifiable beliefs as opposed to another? If I am right must you be wrong? Is there any way to tell which of us is right? Or is there a sense in which we might all be right – even while claiming manifestly different things?

All these questions are pertinent to a discussion of epistemology of religion. We must know what a religious belief is before we can pass judgment on its 'epistemic' legitimacy – or on whether that category even pertains to it.

The following is an attempt to sketch a theory of religious belief that can resolve some of these questions. It is not likely to be acceptable to all theological positions, but my hope is that it will help shed light on some of the issues raised above. The paper will be divided into two sections. The first attempts to discuss the impetus for religious belief itself, through examining some of the phenomenological manifestations of human ontological contingency. The second discusses religious belief as a response to the needs arising from the former.

II. Longing and Finitude

To be finite is to be a fragment. Let us take a simple example. A man spends the day without eating and finds himself hungry in the evening. What is this hunger phenomenally? It is, of course, a 'feeling', and we might even locate it physically as centered in the stomach. But, of course, it is more than a feeling. It is, what I will call, a *longing*. It is a demand for something beyond what can be found in oneself. The hunger itself is a discontentment, an experience of privation, of absence, of an emptiness to be filled. In hunger an absence is revealed to me. An absence that is, paradoxically, a constituent of my being. I hunger. I hunger *for*...for something I cannot find in myself. If I could find it in myself I would not hunger for it, I would have it. I need to fulfill my hunger in order to be fully satisfied in myself. In order to make myself complete – at least in this one respect, and for the moment.

I am not complete in myself. This is the meaning of human finitude. To be finite is to be limited by a something that one is not. We call a rock finite, insofar as it is surrounded on all sides by what it is not. But a rock, we suppose, has no awareness of its finitude, for it has no awareness at all. What we know of as 'this rock' has no knowledge of itself. The rock, we might say, is finite for us but not for itself. For itself it has no self. It is continuous with the whole of being.

But we are finite *for* ourselves. We are finite, first of all, in time and in space. But we are not finite in time and space quite as the rock is. For the rock, space and time merely express its position. It is in a place and at a time. But we are not 'in' space and time, except as bodies – and we are more than bodies. Our being is, rather, *through* space and time. At every moment I am spatially related to a world of things that have distance from me. This distance is itself a feature of my experiential sphere, what Heidegger calls, my 'being-in-the-world.' The other, the not-me, is there for me, *with* me, but as other. It is with me and without me. I am aware of what I am not. Likewise, at every moment I am in temporal progress from what I have been to what I am about to be. Otherness surrounds me spatially and temporally. My finitude manifests itself to me as an awareness of separation from the whole of the space to which I am related and the whole of the time through which I progress.

But still, I think, we have not gotten to the crux of the experience of finitude. I am not merely related, I am dependent. Again, this dependency needs to be distinguished from mere physical contingency. The rock is physically contingent. Except for a certain spatio-temporal configuration, the rock would not and could not be. The same, of course, is true of me. But the rock, we presume, is not aware of its contingency, it is not troubled by it, it does not feel it. For the rock, contingency is not the presence of an absence. It is not a hunger. It is not a longing. Our dependency, however, manifests itself as an absence. Somewhere, elsewhere, is that upon which I depend. I cannot produce from within myself the food I need to satisfy myself. I neither create nor sustain the space in which I must be and the time through which I must be. I am radically dependent on a something else. This dependence is often manifest as anxiety – the anxiety that I will lose touch with that upon which I depend and be reduced to nothing. This dependence is manifest as longing. It is a longing for some sort of communion or union with that upon which I radically depend. To be dependent is to be ontologically incomplete. Only the relation of the dependent with that upon which it depends can sustain, and hence complete, the former. So my finitude manifests itself as a longing for relation with that upon which my being depends.

But there is still more to be said. I am not merely a physical being. I am not satisfied through the mere fulfillment of my physical needs. I speak. My voice issues forth into space. But unless there is another to receive it, to respond to it, it remains unfulfilled. It trails into oblivion. It does not come back to me. This is the subtlest, but also the most profound of my finitudes. My *person* is not complete in itself. I am not my own happiness. Even when I have fulfilled my physical needs there is a remainder to be fulfilled. Something intangible but fundamental. I am separated from a something that I can scarcely even name. And this longing, this *spiritual* longing, seems to me at the very heart of my finitude; i.e., my sense of incompleteness. Unless this is satisfied, I am not satisfied. There remains a restlessness, a lack of peace. Restlessness is precisely the inability to rest where one is, with one's self. One is driven by absence.

Heidegger's discussion of the inauthentic person is pertinent here. In order to escape this restlessness, Heidegger tells us, human beings are driven to 'lose' themselves in everyday affairs. Our inability to be our own foundation drives us to try to establish a foundation in the world of others. But this never really suffices to resolve our restlessness, although it may distract us from attending to it. Ultimately, the social world is no more grounded than we are, and the need of our own being to be true to itself (what Heidegger labels 'the call of conscience') demands, eventually, that we return to ourselves – and to our anxiety.

Thus our ontological insufficiency is manifest as a longing to rest in that which is ontologically sufficient. It is just such resting that Kierkegaard defines as faith. "Faith is: that the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God" (SUD 82). It is such longing, and the satisfaction of such longing, that the mystics refer to when they speak of 'union' with God. This is why the sexual metaphor is so prevalent, and appropriate, to the mystical experience. In sexual longing one is driven to overcome one's separateness in, and with, the other. Sexual longing, and the quiet that follows it, suggests the longing for God, and, finally, the peace of finding God.

It is this longing, its meaning and its fulfillment, that, I suggest, is addressed in the creeds of religion. Jesus says, "If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in

Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water'" (Jn. 7:37). Religion posits the ontological significance of this longing. From the perspective of religion, such longing is not a mere psychological contingency or emotional peculiarity. It is native to the human being as such and, even more fundamentally, it has significance with respect to being as a whole, and one's status within it. The concept of God has two dimensions that are tightly interrelated. God is the metaphysical 'ground' or 'source' of finite being; that which is infinite, that which is not fragmented, that which is not dependent, that upon which all that is dependent depends. And God, *as such*, is the fulfillment of all longing, the consummation of finite being's yearning for completion, security, and wholeness. That which is ontologically ultimate is that which is spiritually consummate. That which is ontologically finite is, by that fact, radically dependent, physically and spiritually, on its ontological ground. Ultimate well-being consists in right relation with that which is ontologically ultimate. Only through such relation do we overcome the privation, and longing, entailed in finitude.

Insofar as there is an interpenetration of the ontological and the spiritual, there is an intrinsic relation between truth and longing. In its most common meaning, the word 'truth' refers to a correspondence between a proposition and reality. But if we allow that a human life can be aligned or misaligned with the 'real,' we can recognize another sense to the word 'truth.' Truth, here, can refer to the correspondence, not of a proposition with reality, but of a human being with the reality upon which he or she depends. When Jesus says 'I am the Truth,' it is this sense in which, I believe, we must understand the word 'Truth.' Jesus is the paradigm for the human being in complete alignment with God. This is the 'truth' that 'sets free.' This is the 'truth' that is the consummation of spiritual longing. It is not theory, it is the alignment of finite being with ultimate being, the lifting of the veil that separates me from that which is my source, support, and fulfillment.

All the great religions agree on this point. In Hinduism, the primary human ill is said to be Ignorance. But it is not a cognitive ignorance that is here referred to, but a failure to *know*, in the

sense of experience, one's true relation to the absolute. In Judaism, the idea of the *covenant* expresses right relation to the ultimate. Insofar as one maintains oneself in such right relation (abides by the covenant), the blessings of God are bestowed upon one. In Christianity, as we have said, Jesus is the paradigm of right relation to God, and *faith* – as we shall discuss below – is the expression of such relation. Even in Buddhism, the 'agnostic' religion, suffering (Dukkha) is said to be caused by attachment (Tanha) to that which is fleeting; i.e., an inappropriate attitude (wrong relation) to what-is.

It is only in this context that we can begin to consider the nature, and legitimacy, of religious claims to 'truth.' Religion endeavors to speak to the question of finite longing; its origin, ontological meaning, and resolution. But religion endeavors to do more than just speak. It endeavors to lead. Religion seeks to provide a *way* to the resolution of spiritual, or ontological, longing. In these endeavors it employs many means. It speaks in poetic language, metaphorical language, mythical language, historical language, metaphysical language, ethical language, etc. in order to orient the listener, cognitively *and* spiritually, to its 'saving' message (kerygma). This message is not meant, primarily, to be informative, but transformative. It is designed to open a pathway between human longing and divine abundance. The language itself, the immersion in the atmosphere conjured up by the language, is to bring one into a space of spiritual receptivity. The success or failure of religious language, the 'truth,' as we might say, of religious language, lies in its ability to act as a conduit to the 'truth that sets free.' Religious language can be misconstrued in two directions. It can be taken literally, as intent on conveying factual information about history, anthropology and/or metaphysics. Or it can be dismissed as merely 'myth' and 'legend,' as having no truly revelatory and transformative character or intent. Ironically, the one misconstrual can often lead to the other. The insistence upon literalism by some, often leads those who reject such literalism to a wholesale dismissal of religion’s spiritual legitimacy as well.

Under these circumstances, what can it possibly mean to do an 'epistemology' of religion? Before we can venture toward an answer we must attempt to penetrate into the reasons such a question is raised. To do this, we must first of all recognize that religious expression is by no means always innocuous. Precisely because of its spiritual potency, because it addresses the deepest longings and fears of human beings, it has tremendous formative – and *de*-formative – power. Secularists have suggested that because of the abuses of this power throughout history humankind would do best to abandon religion altogether. But this is to fail to recognize that the potential for abuse of religion is in exact proportion to its profound import. Religion will not be abandoned, because it speaks to the deepest concerns of human beings. But its potential for abuse must be checked. I consider this to be one of the most important tasks of an epistemology of religion. It is ethically incumbent upon us to be able to do critical thinking with respect to religion and its claims. We must be able to say what these claims mean and do not mean. Precisely because religion speaks in the name of something absolute, and can demand an absolute commitment, it is necessary that we be able to separate the 'wheat' from the 'chaff,' so as not to grant absolute allegiance to that which is only relative and preliminary, or, even worse, altogether perverse.

This, it might be remarked, is not itself a specifically modern concern. The Old Testament's condemnation of idolatry may well be seen as a concern over the pernicious potential of destructive religious forms. In this respect, the Ten Commandments provide two parameters for correct approach to such forms. “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord in vain” implies that one ought to honor the form ('name') as a window to the absolute. “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image” implies that one must not take the form for the absolute itself. Somehow we must be able to forge a path between these two extremes – between wholesale dismissal of religious forms on the grounds that they cannot capture the ineffable, and uncritical acceptance of them on the grounds of 'faith.'

The question of religious epistemology, then, is as much a spiritual and ethical question as it is a philosophical one. To express it in religious terms, it is the question of distinguishing

idolatrous expressions of devotion from 'true' ones. To do this we must develop some notion of what we mean by 'true' in this respect, and what evaluative criteria we can bring to bear to discern the 'true' from its impostors. This is, of course, no easy task. But it is a necessary one.

Of course, no religion takes *itself* to be idolatrous. What is more likely the case, however, is that no religion escapes idolatrous elements. There is a simple reason for this. Religion speaks in the name of the absolute. But it speaks in relative, finite, culturally conditioned terms. It requires discernment, cognitive and spiritual, to distinguish the spiritual message from the form in which it is couched. The Word may have become flesh, but flesh cannot become the Word. It can, at best, betoken it. Whenever this is forgotten we fall into idolatry. Thus, the most luminous revelation is subject to being received in an idolatrous fashion.

In Christianity, the epistemological question becomes most complex and most pressing. In Christianity, faith is said to be a means to, or an expression of, or a necessary condition for, right relation with God. Such faith, furthermore, is expressed through (if not identified with) an adherence to the creed. This fact itself, I believe, has contributed significantly to the attention paid questions of epistemology in Western thought. What is the nature of the adherence to creed called for by faith, and what are its epistemological implications?

III. Faith and Creed

Christianity entails faith. The original Hebrew word, *emun*, translated as 'faith' or 'faithfulness' in the Old Testament, is derived from a stem meaning something like 'constancy' or 'steadfastness' (ISE). It is used often of God, as the One who is eternally constant and steadfast. It is also used to refer to human faithfulness to God and God's commands. *Emun* is translated by the Greek *pistis* and its variants in the Septuagint, and *pistis*, in turn, is the word used for faith in the New Testament. The word translated as 'believe' in the New Testament is simply the verb form of *pistis*; i.e., faith. 'To believe' is the equivalent of 'to have faith.'

In English, the word 'believe' has a decidedly cognitive connotation. One *believes* that some proposition is or isn't true, i.e., correspondent with reality. Is there a relationship between the

idea of steadfastness and the idea of belief? To be steadfast in relation to something is to adhere to it, to stand by it, to not stray from it. To 'believe in' something, in the specific sense of 'to have faith in it,' is also to adhere to it, to set store by it, to be steadfast in relation to it. What I would like to suggest is that, in its true meaning, what is called for in faith is adherence to God *through* the creed, not the cognitive affirmation of the creed itself.

In this reading, then, faith would refer to fidelity, adherence, to God. Fidelity is not subservience, but commitment. The Deuteronomic command, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy might” is, perhaps, the quintessential expression of such fidelity. The epistemological question emerges when we ask where, if anywhere in this finite world, such wholehearted commitment can legitimately be placed? The answer is given to us by the nature of the commitment itself: Nowhere. The commitment of faith is not to anything in the finite world, but to that which ultimately transcends, sustains, and completes it. The relationship between faith and creed, then, is that the latter is an expression (limited, as are all finite expressions) of the former. The creed is an articulation of faith. As such, it is a translation from spirit to concept, necessarily limited in form. We must not take it in 'vain,' but neither should we make of it a 'graven image.' In other words, one does not have faith *in* a creed, one has faith in that to which the creed points. One accepts the creed as an adequate expression of that to which it points, but one does not swear ultimate fidelity to the creed as such – this is to turn the creed into an idol. What we call biblical literalism is just a species of the idolatry of creed, and there are other instances of such idolatry that are not focused on the Bible per se.

Let us try to penetrate more deeply into the distinction, and relation, between faith and creed. Let us take, as an example, the doctrine of the resurrection of Christ. I think most would concede that the strictly historical evidence for this is, at best, inconclusive. The only reports we have are in the gospels themselves, whose strict historical reliability is, at least, questionable. But even if the historical reports were fully persuasive we would still have no evidence as to the theological

significance of the event, which is, from a spiritual perspective, the essential thing about it. Suppose we could travel back two millennia and situate ourselves in front of the cave of Joseph of Arimathea early Easter morning. Suppose we should see the rock at the front of the cave moving of itself to uncover the opening. Suppose we should watch the prone Jesus rise from his resting place and exit the cave. What meaning would it have? Of course, we have two thousand years of interpretation to tell us what meaning it has, but let us attempt to disregard this for the moment. We are empirical scientists. We want to focus on the event itself. Surely we would consider the event an extraordinary occurrence, unusual in the extreme, exceedingly difficult to explain. We might want to subject Jesus to a variety of physical tests to try to determine what might have happened. We might write a paper for a medical journal. But beyond this, nothing. It is *faith* that gives the event its meaning. Not faith *that* the event took place. But faith in the saving power of God that is revealed *through* the event, and of which the event is an expression, an articulation, to the eyes of the faithful.

This is not to say that the witnessing of such an event might not serve as a strong impetus to faith. But faith itself is not belief that such and such an event took place, or even that such and such a metaphysical fact is true, it is a commitment to a life lived in alignment with God. The justification for such faith is that we *long* for such a life, and faith is a response to this longing, it is not that we have good reason to suppose that various facts about the physical, or even the metaphysical, world are so. The verification of faith is that the life to which it leads speaks to our longing. This, of course, is not an *epistemic* verification, but faith is not an epistemic issue. The 'truth' to which faith attests is not empirical truth or even metaphysical truth, it is the 'truth that sets free.' No one can verify this truth except the person who is set free by it.

Intellectual integrity is restored for religion when we are able to acknowledge what we don't know, while maintaining our commitment to the life of faith. To the extent that one places absolute value on the assertion of certain empirical, or even metaphysical, truth-claims the intellect is not free, and even more significantly, not honest. We do not know what we do not know and we cannot honestly claim to know it. We cannot assert as certainly true what we admit

we don't know without adding absurdity to our dishonesty. One should not have to abandon intellectual honesty to pursue a life of faith. Quite the contrary, faith *demands* the most scrupulous honesty of every sort.

But I can imagine a reflective Christian responding in the following way: "I have been a Christian all my life. Christianity has been my support, my solace, my guide and my hope through good times and bad. I experience the presence of God in Christianity, the presence of something true and good and infinitely worthy. I have seen people whose lives were in shambles pick themselves up and make something of themselves through adoption of the faith. The creed resonates with me, and speaks to me in a deep and powerful way. It helps me to understand myself and my relations with others. I cannot believe that the goodness I experience, the holiness I have sensed, could be an illusion. Therefore, I believe Christianity to be a religion established by God, and the essentials of its creed to be given by God. As God could not be false, it follows that the essentials of the creed must be true. My belief in the resurrection event and its meaning is certainly not empirically based, but neither is it without foundation altogether. My experience of God's presence in Christianity confirms for me the truth of the Christian creed."

The salient points of the above account may be enumerated as follows:

1. I experience the presence of God in Christianity.
2. I, therefore, conclude that Christianity and its creed are established by God.
3. God does not lie.
4. Therefore, the essentials of the Christian creed must be true in a correspondence sense.

Of course, we can deny the force of the entire argument by simply denying the veridicality of the experience cited in 1. The unbeliever might retort: "In fact, all you have shown is that the Christian faith works for you in a way that is, no doubt, subjectively, very powerful. But there are examples of others for whom the Christian religion has not worked in the same way, who will report that they don't experience 'God' in Christianity. Further, there are Muslims who claim to experience the presence of God in Islam and Jews who claim to experience God's presence in Judaism, and each could make precisely the same argument about their respective creeds as you

do. The fact that you 'feel' the presence of God in Christianity is insufficient indication that God is really there, and so your conclusions do not follow."

This leaves us at an impasse. The believers will believe and the disbelievers will disbelieve and everyone will agree only that they disagree. This also puts the reflective Christian in a difficult position. She will now have to account for the fact that so many people, not only unbelievers, but the devout of other religions, do not experience God in a specifically Christian way. Traditionally, Christianity's response has been to deny the veridicality of 1 for all religions but its own. But in our increasingly global world this is becoming a more and more difficult position to maintain. It becomes clear, to any who will expose themselves to other traditions, that one can find sincerely devout people in all religions. The Christian is thus in the strange position of agreeing with the unbeliever as to the illusory nature of very many 'experiences of God' – all those that are not had within the bounds of Christianity. But once it is conceded that many sincerely devout people are deluded as to their experience of God, it seems a mere prejudice for the Christian to maintain that she alone is undeluded. If Gandhi could be deluded, why not Mother Teresa?

Even worse, the reflective Christian is at a loss to be able to explain schisms within her own religion. If God is watching over and guaranteeing the Christian creed, how can there be disagreements as to what this creed itself should be? Is it that only *one* Christian sect is of God and all the others based on illusion?

I would like to carve out another alternative. One which will allow 1, 2, and 3 above to be true, but 4 to be false. If we allow that the purpose of the creed is not to provide historical or metaphysical information, but to provide a vehicle to relation with God, then we can allow that the experience of God in Christianity might indeed be veridical, that Christianity can legitimately claim to be established by God, that God is true (in the sense of faithful to God’s purpose), but that the specific details of the Christian creed might not fully correspond to historical or metaphysical fact. In other words, we could say to our reflective Christian that her experience of the sanctity of her Christian life might be, in every significant respect, real, but that her

conclusions as to what this means for the literal veridicality of the creed might be wrong. God may have provided different vehicles for other cultures that are, in their own contexts, as legitimate as Christianity is in its. And, indeed, based upon the presence of the sincerely devout in all religions, this is the most reasonable position for the theist to adopt.

But I can hear the Christian strenuously objecting: "My religion tells me that precisely this is false. God desires that all human beings come to God through Christ. This is an essential element of my creed. If this creed is, as you allow, established by God, then this element must itself be derived from God. In that case, it would be a violation of the very creed established by God to accept the position you propose."

Is it possible to maintain that a creed could be, in a significant sense, 'established by God,' and yet be fallible in its articulation – not only 'not true' in a correspondence sense, but even flawed in a spiritual sense? I believe that it is not only possible to maintain this, but that it *must* be maintained if we are to acknowledge human fallibility and avoid idolatry. The creed is expressed in human concepts, in human language, to human beings and *through* human beings. There is every indication that there are elements of the Bible that are only interpretable as responses to certain situations contemporary to the writers. In other words, revelation is mediated by the people and circumstances through which it is received. God does not drop God's message from the sky fully formed and infallible. God drops it into the minds and hearts of human beings who then must make of it what they can. To suppose that a creed articulated by humans might be perfect is to attribute a godlike quality to the human being. But, even more, to suppose that I am in a position to distinguish, among all the creeds and variations of creeds that exist, *the* one that is the perfect one, is to attribute to myself a godlike capacity for discernment that I do not have. We must distinguish, again, between the infinite value of the infinite and the relative value of its finite articulation, and render each its due. The devotion due the former is not due the latter.

How, then, are we to distinguish between good doctrine and bad? My answer is that the whole person is called upon to do this. We must bring to bear our spiritual discernment, our ethical sensibilities, our life experience, our intellectual acumen, our cultural heritage, etc., in order to

separate the 'wheat' from the 'chaff,' doctrinally speaking. And we must remain mindful of our own fallibility and the continual possibility of error.

What does this do to Christianity's doctrine that faith is requisite to salvation? If we allow that there is no infallible doctrine, that there is no sure way to know that one doctrine is right and another wrong, then, it seems, salvation becomes arbitrary. Those who happen to light upon the correct creed will be saved and the others not.

But this is only a problem to the extent that we suppose that faithfulness to creed, as opposed to God, is of supreme importance. If we recognize that the faith that saves is faith in God, not doctrine, the problem does not arise. There may be many doctrinal expressions of the one saving faith, each imperfect in itself but adequate for bringing one to God.

Doesn't this, however, undermine Christian evangelism, or at least deprive it of its urgency? If we accept that there are non-Christian paths to God, on what grounds can Christianity be recommended to others?

On the contrary, I would argue that Christian evangelism is freed, by this approach, to deliver its message lovingly and honestly. The Christian can only witness to the spiritual efficacy of the Christian message in his or her own life. This is actually what the Christian believer can knowingly affirm – not the ineffectiveness of non-Christian approaches. Our 'reflective Christian' can honestly talk about the spiritual value of Christianity from her own life experience, but she cannot denigrate the spiritual value of Buddhism, except on the basis of a faith in doctrine that, as we've seen, is inappropriate. To those who are moved by her testimony, she may well feel that she has done a great service. To those unmoved, she may accept that God is calling them in a different way.

Of course, there will be those who will resist this interpretation and insist that there is only one true creed, and salvation depends upon affirming it. To these we can only point out the pernicious consequences of this belief. Billions of human beings, many sincerely devout within their own religions, must be considered deluded. We will have to suppose that God prefers those

born to Christian families, who thereby have a far higher likelihood of affirming the 'true' faith than others. We will have to insist, on principle, that other religions are illegitimate and dangerous, regardless of any ostensible merit they may have, leading to socio-cultural divisiveness and suspicion indistinguishable from the basest forms of prejudice. We will have to believe that some earthly authority (the presenter of the 'true' creed) is to be given unquestioned allegiance, even though there is no objective way to discern which earthly authority is so deserving. The epistemological question becomes a nightmare. If we can no longer appeal to the inner experience of the devotee for the validity of his or her faith, what can we appeal to? Religious life becomes a labyrinth, in which no one can tell whether they are on the right path or not. All of this seems inconsistent with belief in a fully loving God, which forces us to reinterpret the very meaning of the word 'love,' and not to love's advantage.

All these evils seem to me to be a direct consequence of the evil of idolatry. Finitude excludes, infinity includes. When we give the finite infinite status, as we do in all forms of idolatry, we exclude radically, and thereby create radical division; the very opposite of what love seeks. Thus, to render absolute faith to a creed, rather than to God, is a form of idolatry with disastrous consequences. If we accept, on the other hand, that the creed is a finite, fallible, medium to faith in God, we are freed to fully affirm the value of the creed without confusing it with the value of God.

In sum, religious creedal statements should not be subject to the same kind of epistemological scrutiny as, say, scientific assertions – not because, as 'revelation,' they are somehow exempt from criticism – but because they should not be taken as factual (epistemic) truth-claims to begin with. They are vehicles to spiritual life. Exactly *how* they serve as such vehicles is a deep question whose consideration will have to wait for another essay. But the question one must ask of a creed is not whether it is 'true' in the factual sense, but whether it is adequate for leading to the 'truth that sets free.' Does it serve the purpose of conducing to faith? Does it address spiritual longing in a meaningful and effective way? With this question we are no longer in the realm of

epistemology. This is an intimately personal, ‘existential,’ question, not an epistemological question. The spiritual devotee is called upon to decide, on the basis of his or her own spiritual yearning and insight, what serves and what does not. Having adopted a creed, one is not called upon to assert its metaphysical or historical truth, which one cannot know in a definitive way, but its spiritual adequacy, which one knows through the depths of one's own experience.

Let me conclude, then, by addressing the four questions we began the paper with.

1. Religious belief is not the affirmation of truth claims, but an adherence to a spiritual vehicle. One is not called upon to assert truths that one cannot verify.

2. Its relationship to 'salvation' or 'sanctification' is intrinsic. The life of faith *mediated* by the creed is what sanctifies, not one’s overt affirmation of one creed over another.

3. The basis upon which one adopts a creed is one's spiritual longing and need, and the extent to which the creed serves it. It is my opinion that spirituality is mediated not only through creed but through family, community and culture. Given that spiritual efficacy (not epistemic validity) is the basis for adoption of a creed, there is, in my view, legitimacy in staying with the creed one was raised in simply because one was raised in it – because it is the common expression of one's family and community faith, and because it connects to one's personal roots.

4. And this, of course, answers the question concerning religious diversity. Many vehicles can approach the same goal. And perhaps different vehicles serve different spiritual needs. Ultimately, one can never say that another path is false, only that it does not suffice for oneself. (I am speaking spiritually, not ethically. Ethically, there are certainly some beliefs that are noxious.) Evangelists are in a position to make positive claims about their own creed, but not negative claims about the creeds of others.

I would like to say a final word about how this approach differs from the Alstonian approach mentioned at the start of the paper. Alston suggests that religious belief falls under the same category as other, what I will call 'fact,' beliefs. For Alston, even sensory belief is said to be a 'doxastic practice' subject to similar forms of verification as religious belief, differing from it in

reliability and extent, but not in kind. My view is that what is called 'religious belief' (i.e., faith) is something altogether different from factual beliefs of any kind, and should not really be considered under the same category. What validates or invalidates the one is entirely different from what validates or invalidates the other. What needs to be shown by an epistemology of religion is not how religious faith is similar to fact-based beliefs (*a la* Alston), but in what way it is another thing altogether. When this is seen, many of the dilemmas surrounding questions of religious belief can be successfully resolved.

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