

Fact-Checking Faith

From Category Confusion to “Higher” Truth

Paul H. Jones

During the 2012 presidential campaign, an attack ad by Mitt Romney made false statements about President Obama. When the ad was declared inaccurate by most journalists, Republican pollster Neil Newhouse retorted, “We’re not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact checkers.”¹ Instead of pulling what Romney’s campaign called their “most effective” ad, they doubled down and immediately released a new one that repeated the same allegation.

In our post-Enlightenment world, facts are the trademark of truth. Most baby boomers can recite the mantra of the television show *Dragnet*’s Sergeant Joe Friday: “Just the facts, ma’am; just the facts.”

Former Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton, in her emotional farewell speech to department employees on February 1, 2013, dismissed critics of the administration’s handling of the attack on U.S. diplomats in Benghazi, Libya, by declaring that these detractors neither live in an “evidence-based world” nor “accept the facts.”

During the Tuesday, January 15, 2013, installment of *Morning Edition* on National Public Radio, an interviewee responded to the question, “Do you believe in God?” with this comment: “I don’t really, but I want to.” Then he went on to say that the problem with these kinds of questions “is that you don’t have anything that clearly states ‘Yes, this is fact.’”²

Some Christians are distraught to learn that many biblical scholars interpret the narratives of sacred scripture as more ideology than history. Mainline professors of the Bible find little to no evidence that the patriarch Abraham existed, that the Hebrew exodus from Egypt happened, that Moses was a historical figure, that the conquest of Canaan occurred as recorded in the book of Joshua, and that David reigned over Israel’s “golden age.”

Even more upsetting for churchgoers, the canonical gospels contain many discrepancies. For example, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus’ hometown is Bethlehem (2:22–23), while in Luke it is Nazareth (1:26–27). For Mark (6:17–18) and Matthew (14:3–4), John the Baptist baptizes Jesus and is then imprisoned, yet for Luke (3:20), John is im-

prisoned before Jesus is baptized. Jesus’ disturbance in the Temple in the first three canonical gospels (Mark 11:15–19, Matt 21:12–17, Luke 19:45–48) occurs at the end of Jesus’ life and functions as the trigger event for his arrest, but in John (2:13–22) it occurs at the beginning of his three-year public ministry. Because these contradictions cannot be reconciled, it appears that fact-checking has irrefutably and irredeemably condemned the Bible as fiction, not fact.

In our evidence-based world, what happens to faith when fact checkers invade the sacrosanct realm of religion? Is religion doomed to the dustbin of history (at worst) and to the margins of society (at best)? Or does religion double down like the Romney campaign and release more dogmatic decrees? Or is there another way?

This essay will explore, in three interrelated moves, the impact that fact-checking faith has on religion in general and the church in particular. First, it will describe the historical origins of this dilemma by examining the crucible of the Enlightenment and its challenges to the truth claims of the Christian tradition. Second, it will identify three cases of category confusion that result from the Enlightenment’s empirical mode of verification. Third, it will clarify the category of faith and posit that religious truth is “higher” truth.

The Crucible of the Enlightenment and Its Challenges

Although religion expresses the perennial impulse of humans to make sense of the world, its language and its legitimacy were severely tested by the Enlightenment.³ The Enlightenment generated a foundational shift in the way in which people thought about themselves and their world, a shift so prominent and pervasive that it affected not only everyday lives but also religious convictions. Four factors during the Enlightenment played a pivotal role: paradigm shift, the rise of historical consciousness, the scientific worldview, and the “Copernican revolution” in thinking inaugurated by the philosopher Immanuel Kant.⁴ Each subsection of the four factors concludes with a brief statement about how this particular Enlightenment factor challenged religious life.

Paradigm Shift⁵

Put succinctly, a paradigm maps the world. It is a conceptual framework or comprehensive model in which something or someone is located in the cosmos. In science, paradigms organize objects in a field of study, while in religion paradigms orient people to the world. A “paradigm shift” occurs when one systemic way of viewing the data is replaced by an altogether new version. A well-known example is the paradigm shift which resulted from Copernicus’ observation that we live in a heliocentric (sun-centered) planetary system and not in a geocentric (earth-centered) universe. A paradigm shift changes our internal picture of the world but not the external objects in the world.

Prior to the Enlightenment, European Christians envisioned a world ordained by God whose providential order was faithfully narrated in the biblical story. However, the Enlightenment produced a paradigm shift that reversed the relationship of God and humanity. Instead of people fitting into God’s story of creation and care, humans now decided how God would fit into *their* story. Princeton University sociologist Robert Wuthnow described this shift when he observed: “At one time theologians argued that the chief purpose of humankind was to glorify God. Now it would seem that the logic has been reversed: The chief purpose of God is to glorify humankind.”⁶

What is most important for Western Christianity is that the Enlightenment paradigm shift in religion displaced God from the center of the universe and replaced the deity with human beings. No longer the creator of the world who ordains the natural order, God must now be accommodated to the new humanistic order.

Two interlocked challenges arose from this paradigm shift. First, religion was compartmentalized as just one more

thing to do, neither privileged nor promoted. Second, religion was marginalized to the periphery, neither valued nor venerated. Personal preference triumphed.

The Rise of Historical Consciousness

One of the most influential results of the Enlightenment was the conviction that empirically verifiable truth was the only version of truth worth knowing. This unassailable principle was grounded in the concept of particularity. Because all human beings are embedded in time and space, we are all historically located and culturally conditioned. Because we cannot get outside of ourselves to obtain a bird’s-eye view of the world, our perceptions are always partial, and our pronouncements are always fallible. Awareness of our historical consciousness means that there are no universal truth claims. Religion is no exception. Therefore, the best we can do is to validate truth via evidence-based verification.

The challenges of this principle for religious decrees are huge. Since all humans live in a particular place and at a particular time, our thoughts are both biased and limited. There are neither objective viewpoints nor absolute interpretations, only relative ones. Therefore, no one (prophet or priest) and/or nothing (Bible or tradition) can speak infallibly. Religious truth claims, like all other human utterances, are subject to empirical confirmation.

The Scientific Worldview

By employing the criterion of causality to investigate and map the empirical world, scientists gradually yet steadily diminished the appeal to divine purpose in order to explain the interworkings of the universe. Because thinkers like Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543), Isaac Newton (1643–1727), Pierre-Simon Laplace (1749–1827), and

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Albert Einstein (1879–1955) more and more satisfactorily answered the vexing questions about the nature of the cosmos, the concept of “God of the gaps” emerged. That is, God was invoked only to explain the temporary “gaps” in scientific knowledge. With the continued expansion of scientific information, God would be retired by some (deists) and denied altogether by others (atheists).

According to scientific tenets, humans now lived in a “prose-flattened world.” The transcendent was reduced to just another quantifiable datum to be explained, and the mysterious was just another problem to be solved. Christians could not ignore the severe challenges that the empirical method of the scientific worldview caused the church. If all valid statements required verifiable evidence, and yet religion appealed to supernatural explanations and divine revelations that were neither repeatable nor testable, how would the truth claims of the tradition be protected and preserved?

The Copernican Revolution in Thinking

The Enlightenment’s resolute confidence in the ability of human reason to chart the world is no better illustrated than by what came to be called the “Copernican revolution” in thinking, inaugurated by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Like Copernicus in science, Kant turned traditional philosophical “thinking about thinking” on its head. According to the conventional model, the mind is a passive receptor of stimuli from the world, a neutral observer that alters neither the perception nor the status of the perceived object. This view of the human mind grounded the conviction that our knowledge about the world is objective.

Kant refuted this accepted theory by arguing the opposite, that the mind is an active interpreter of the world. Like a computer, the mind possesses default settings through which the world is observed and interpreted. All knowledge of the world and the self is filtered through historically conditioned categories of the mind. Although our operational settings or presuppositions are seldom acknowledged, they nonetheless shape the way we think and act in the world.

Frequently called the “turn to the self,” the Copernican revolution in thinking—that the mind is active and not passive, that knowledge is subjective (mind-dependent) and not objective—established “the self” as the irreducible starting point for all knowledge. Because all data is tainted by human biases, all domains of inquiry, including philosophy and religion, must account for the role of the self.

Kant responded to his own challenge to the veracity of religious truth claims by positing two distinct realms of knowledge. Science operates in the world of objects in time and space, while God exists in the world outside time and space. Since the deity resides outside of the world confirmed by sense knowledge, God is not a finite object to

be quantified. Thus, for Kant, science and religion neither conflict with nor contradict one another because they engage two non-overlapping domains of knowledge.

Regrettably, Kant’s proposed solution reduces religion to subjectivity. Today science is typically classified as a “hard” discipline, which is based in “fact” and open to public investigation, while religion is usually characterized as a “soft” discipline, which is based in “feeling” and open only to private faith experience. Although religion is now safe from the unrelenting critique of empirical inquiry, it has been reduced to mere emotion and thereby exiled from serious societal discourse.

In conclusion, the confluence of these four Enlightenment factors—paradigm shift, the rise of historical consciousness, the scientific worldview, and the “Copernican revolution” inaugurated by Kant—posed serious challenges to religion in general and Christianity in particular. In a post-Enlightenment world, neither absolute truths nor unified worldviews exist. Multivalence (the possibility of various meanings) and misunderstanding are the new norms. Since all human knowledge is historically located and culturally situated, and therefore contingent and conditional, ambiguity trumps certainty. Because all perceptions and pronouncements are subjective, there are no universal religious truth claims. Unfortunately, ecclesial efforts to preserve the traditional teachings of the church in the face of these Enlightenment challenges spawned numerous cases of category confusion. Three examples will be explored in the next section.

Three Cases of Category Confusion

The Enlightenment served as a crucible for religion in general and Christianity in particular because its basic insights undermined the foundational assumptions of the church and thereby challenged its core doctrines. Conceived and developed in the old worldview, the church had to determine how it would respond to the sober challenges presented by this new intellectual ethos. Too often it decided (consciously or not) to accept the Enlightenment’s empirical method to validate truth and thereby unintentionally created cases of category confusion. This section describes and examines three examples: faith and belief, faith and fact, and faith and doubt.

Faith and Belief

According to our cultural lexicon, Americans (both inside and outside of the church) use the words “religion,” “faith,” and “belief” interchangeably.⁷ In the public square, faith typically means “believing” a set of doctrinal statements to be true. In the church, faith routinely defaults to “believing” that God created the world, that Jesus is the Son of God who died for our sins, and that the afterlife is reserved for those who believe correctly. Succinctly, the

unexamined assumption is that faith and belief are identical. Like a mathematical formula, if faith equals belief, then a change in the belief side of the equation automatically changes the faith side of the equation. However, a changed faith, based on this analogy, is no longer *the* faith!

The challenges of the Enlightenment in general, and the scientific worldview in particular, greatly contributed to the emphasis on faith as “propositional believing” and the resultant identification of faith as belief. Because the Enlightenment dethroned supernatural revelation and installed human reason as the sole criterion to establish truth claims, scientific inquiry gradually eroded the veracity of traditional church assertions about Jesus’ virgin birth, his miracles, and his resurrection. On the one hand, the church gladly accepted the reduction of faith to private “feeling,” but, on the other hand, it tenaciously defended its inherited belief statements. Over time, faith morphed into the silver bullet invoked by adherents to validate Christian truth in the face of contradictory evidence. In short, whenever Christian doctrine and scientific knowledge clashed, faith meant “believing the unbelievable.” The more implausible the doctrine, the more faith it took to believe it. Although this strategy fortified the theological firewall and protected, for many, the authority of the church from external threats, it fossilized doctrinal formulations. Faith’s flak jacket against perceived peril doubled, however, as an intellectual straight jacket. Since neither doubts nor questions penetrated its thick armor, the opportunity for reinterpretation, let alone reformulation in response to a changing context, was internally thwarted.

A remedy for this category confusion (the identity of faith and belief) is to uncouple the two terms by clarifying their respective domain of meaning. For the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), faith is always and exclusively trust *in God* (rather than cognitive assent to statements about God). As the traditional term for the awareness and acceptance of transcendence (a depth dimension exceeding the ordinary, a horizon of meaning at the end of human vision), faith is fundamentally theocentric. However, Christianity claims a triune God. In both tradition and scripture, Christian faith signifies abiding trust in the God who is revealed most fully in Jesus of Nazareth, called the Christ, and whose ongoing presence is mediated by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the primary referent of faith for Christians is a particular person: Jesus, the human face of God. Christian faith, therefore, is essentially understood in terms of personal relationship. To be a Christian is to profess trust in the person, Jesus, who is proclaimed the Christ.

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Because faith is a relational category, trust (not belief) is the appropriate theological synonym. An intimate relationship with another person is inherently predicated on trust. One “knows” the other person in the sense that the other has self-disclosed a consistent pattern of thought and action that elicits assurance. Analogous to an interpersonal relationship, the Christian life of faith is first and foremost about an individual’s relationship to the God who is revealed in Jesus the Christ.

At its core, Christian faith refers to the positive response of a person to the good news of the gospel. What is most important is that faith only glimpses divine presence. Thus, faith claims are couched in humility. Since faith is not the intellectual assent to an idea, but the intimate consent to a relationship with “an Ultimate Other,” it both recognizes and respects its own “higher ignorance.”

Because of the limits imposed on human reason by the Enlightenment’s understanding of historical consciousness, all religious declarations of faith are partial. Furthermore, all human insights into the holy are doubly mediated: all encounters of the divine in this world are indirectly experienced through either material objects (for example, the burning bush or bread and wine) or human subjects (for example, a Hebrew prophet or a Christian saint), and are interpreted, in turn, by an active and historically conditioned human mind. Consequently, Christian religious formulations of the holy are approximations at best and not “The Truth.” As ambiguous reflections of the transcendent, human assertions should neither be absolutized nor identified with the deity itself.

Belief is not the same as faith. Belief is a cognitive function that encapsulates human attempts to make sense of a prior experience of the holy. To understand a previous encounter requires one to step back and detach oneself, and thereby involves the mental process of reflection upon and discernment of its meaning.

In conclusion, an individual who has an experience of the transcendent via material objects and/or human subjects will subsequently attempt to make sense of that encounter. If the interaction elicits trust, then faith is present. Faith, then, is relational and primary, while belief denotes the subsequent intellectual process of understanding the prior experience of the holy.

By distinguishing faith from belief and by restoring faith as trust, the Christian life is excused from fighting unnecessary defensive battles with cultural critics and skeptics. The church is now free to engage philosophy and science in serious dialogue. Most important for Christian purposes, the acceptance of its own “higher ignorance” compels the

church to unapologetically reinterpret and reformulate its truth claims, as well as to regularly initiate and welcome conversations with both its religious and non-religious neighbors.

Faith and Fact

The inclusion of “fact” into the category of “faith” is a natural extension of both the mistaken identity that faith equals belief and the misplaced assumption that theology, like science, requires an evidence-based method to verify truth. Responding to the Enlightenment challenges, the church feared that the truth claims of the gospel would be perceived by the culture as fiction and not as fact. This worry stippled the pages of nineteenth-century Christian literature. In the 1888 English novel *Robert Elsmere*, the wife of a parson, whose faith is devastated by the findings of biblical criticism, protests: “If the Gospels are not true in fact, as history, I cannot see how they are true at all, or of any value.”⁸ At the end of the century, American Presbyterian theologians Archibald Hodge and Benjamin Warfield of Princeton Seminary stated unequivocally that everything in scripture was “truth to the facts.”⁹ In the middle of the twentieth century, George E. Ladd of Fuller Theological Seminary explained the exceptionality of Christianity by declaring that

the truth of Christianity is inexplicably bound up with the truth of certain historical facts. And if those facts should be disproved, Christianity would be false. This, however, is what makes Christianity unique . . . Modern man has a means of actually verifying Christianity’s truth by historical evidence.¹⁰

By collapsing fact into faith, as well as historical truth into theological truth, literalism reigned supreme. Since God was the author of scripture and God told only the truth, the Bible is therefore literally true. This logic, in turn, spawned the derivative correlate of biblical inerrancy.

However, the rise of historical criticism contested these claims. At minimum, a literal reading of scripture requires an original manuscript; but there is none. Jesus spoke in Aramaic but the gospels are written in Greek. And the Bible in general and the gospels in particular are riddled with contradictions. Two examples will suffice. First, in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is crucified the day after the Preparation of the Passover (Mark 15:25), whereas, in the Gospel of John, Jesus is executed on the Day of Preparation (John 19:14–16). Second, in the synoptic gospels, Simon of Cyrene is compelled “to carry [Jesus’] cross” (Matt 27:32, Mark 15:21, Luke 23:26) but, in the

Gospel of John, Jesus carries the cross “by himself” (John 19:17a).

In the first example, the two accounts cannot be historically harmonized. Either Jesus died on the Day of Preparation or he died after the Day of Preparation. Moreover, John makes a theological, not a historical, point: Jesus is the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). That is, the sacrifice of Jesus represents salvation for humanity, just as the sacrifice of the lamb represented salvation for the ancient Israelites during the first Passover in Egypt. Since the Passover lambs are killed on the Day of Preparation, John had Jesus die on that day. In the second example, John’s emphatic “by himself” demonstrates both his knowledge of the synoptic storyline and his total disagreement. Again, John’s obvious contradiction makes a theological point: Jesus knows and controls all things (John 10:17–18; 13:1–3; and 18:1–6). Consequently, he requires no assistance to carry his own cross.

As ancient biographies, the canonical gospels were more interested in the character of Jesus as exhibited in his words and deeds and less concerned with the historical facts of his life. Furthermore, the gospel writers were followers of Jesus who believed that his influence was not confined to the past, but alive to the present. Therefore, Christians were free to revise his teachings to address the needs of their present situations. “This freedom to adapt the teachings of Jesus, no doubt conditioned above

all by the church’s resurrection belief that Jesus was still alive and speaking to his followers,”¹¹ partially explains the abundance of textual discrepancies and inconsistencies. In brief, the gospels, like the Bible itself, are more concerned with theological truth than historical accuracy. The gospels are not factual narratives of Jesus’ life, but faith-informed, theological portraits that witness to his salvific meaning for the world. Hence, early Christian writers changed historical facts (if they even knew them) in order to advance theological truths.

The preoccupation of some contemporary Christians with historical veracity, and thus a “just the facts” mentality, creates a category confusion that misguidedly confines faith to fact. That trajectory of thought mandates a literal interpretation of scripture and doctrine. However, the biblical writers constructed religious stories for theological and didactic purposes. Although their narratives contain some reliable information, it can be exceedingly difficult to distinguish fact from fiction, history from myth.

In conclusion, fact was collapsed into faith by some Christians in order to safeguard religious truth from the

Continued on page 18

The preoccupation of some contemporary Christians with historical veracity, and thus a “just the facts” mentality, creates a category confusion that misguidedly confines faith to fact.

homophobia of Miscavige and other leaders, Haggis began to see the cult for what it actually was. He admitted that for thirty-four years he was blinded to the realities of an abusive cult.

Going Clear is an important book. The research is thoroughly documented and it contains many primary sources, such as church archive records, interviews, and the writings of Hubbard. Before reading this book I had never really taken Scientology seriously. Now, I see it as a dangerous power-cult that has ruined many lives due to the fantastic claims of a very troubled man. **4R**

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Notes

1. A “thetan” is an immortal spiritual being, according to L. Ron Hubbard. Thetans are said to inhabit human bodies.

2. “New Religious Movement” (NRM) has become a wide-ranging term applied to the thousands of recent new religions that have developed esoteric doctrines that depart from the mainstream traditions of the world religions—such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Sometimes labeled as a “cult,” NRM is the current term used by scholars to describe a number of newer, mostly twentieth- and twenty-first-century groups, such as Christian Science, the Unification Church, Hare Krishnas, Aum Shinriko, and Scientology.

3. An E-Meter is a crude type of lie detector that supposedly measures electrical resistance in one’s body. The subject holds two metal electrodes while an auditor asks questions of the subject. The meter is said to show positive or negative energy which indicates the internal well-being of the person being audited.

4. The word “blow” is used by Scientologists to describe someone who leaves the church and no longer believes in the teachings.

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perceived ravages of the Enlightenment’s relentless critique. The motive was admirable but the method was mistaken. Christian faith is not identical to historical fact, since religious truth points to the transcendent which is revealed in but not limited to history. Even in the midst of divine revelation, the holy is hidden. And, just as important, the human recipient of revelation is never an objective observer. Consequently, religious speech must adopt the language of poetry rather than prose, metaphor rather than historicity. Like faith itself, the biblical story must be trusted, not tested by evidence-based procedures. And the faithful adherent must be open to the “truth of the Christian fiction,” since fiction, like poetry and art, describes alternative visions of the world, in this case the reign of God on earth.

Faith and Doubt

For many churchgoers who uncritically accept the two previous instances of category confusion, doubt is the arch-enemy of faith. Doubt threatens because it challenges at best and destroys at worst the core truth claims of the tradition. In short, it engenders a crisis of faith. Although our third case study of category confusion (faith and doubt) presumes the mistaken assumptions about faith in our first two examples, it is different from them in that it neither conflates nor collapses the other variable (in this case, doubt) into faith. Rather, the two concepts in this case study are perceived as antithetical and mutually exclusive.

This posture of antagonism between faith and doubt also emanates from a cursory reading of the gospels’ caricature of doubt.¹² After Peter fails to walk on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus rebukes him by saying, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matt 14:31). In the Gospel of John, Jesus responds to “doubting” Thomas’ plea for evidence-based faith with the words, “Do not doubt but believe” (John 20:27).

On the surface, these accounts appear to juxtapose faith and doubt. However, a closer examination reveals that the opposite is true. Thomas, the supposed “evil twin” of faith, confesses in the very next line that Jesus is “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28). And, Peter, who not only doubts but also denies Jesus three times, is hailed as the paragon of faith and the “rock” upon which the church is built (Matt 16:18).

The denigration of doubt in both culture and church results in part from a misunderstanding of its meaning, as well as its role in the life of faith. Etymologically, doubt is not the opposite of belief. Derived from the Latin *dubito* (meaning “two”), doubt signals vacillation. To doubt means to be of “two minds” and therefore to stand at the “crossroads” of two possible routes or ideas. Hence, doubt denotes an open mind that refuses to equate faith with blind belief.

What is more important is that doubt complements and enhances the life of faith. As finite creatures, we humans neither apprehend nor comprehend the fullness of the holy. Consequently, faith involves both participation in and separation from God. When Christians talk about the “certainty of faith,” it is an existential claim that emanates from their experience of the transcendent. However, faith is never “certain,” since our qualitative difference from the divine ensures an “in-spite-of” element intrinsic to faith itself. Thus, the “doubt of faith” emerges from our separation from God. In the words of Paul Tillich, “Faith is certain in so far as it is an experience of the holy. But faith is uncertain in so far as the infinite to which it is related is received by a finite being.”¹³

Doubt is valuable to the life of faith in at least two ways. First, it chastens Christian claims to certainty (and thus idolatry) by reminding adherents of their separation and sinfulness, their finitude and fallibility. Because faith is an-

chored in an ineffable mystery, doubt elicits humility and hope. Second, doubt enriches the religious journey of faith by reminding travelers of the merit of ambiguity and questioning. The former militates against arrogance and hubris, while the latter confesses the need for both the transcendent and a deepening faith.

In conclusion, doubt is neither antithetical to, nor mutually exclusive of faith. Our third case of category confusion is also wrong. On the contrary, doubt complements and enhances the life of faith by minimizing the penchant for pride and by maximizing the yearning for curiosity and imagination. Doubt, therefore, is a welcomed companion on the journey of faith.

Category Clarity and “Higher” Truth

Because humans have always been a question to themselves, the impulse to make meaning of the world is perennial. And, for two thousand years, Christians have contributed to this “Great Conversation.” However, the crucible of the Enlightenment and its challenges to the church severely threatened both its language and its legitimacy. The more public and popular response was to accept the Enlightenment principles (especially the empirical mode of verification) inherent within the above four factors. Yet, that decision too often resulted in cases of category confusion and thus theological dead ends. The move from category confusion to category clarity will be accomplished in three steps: (1) the limits on human knowledge will be revisited, (2) the transcendence of the holy will be restated, and (3) the qualitative difference between humans and the divine will be reaffirmed.

First, human beings are both body and mind, flesh and spirit. Although we are embodied, we can and do ask questions of meaning and purpose to which there are no absolute answers. As the Enlightenment factors indisputably taught us, all human knowledge is historically located and culturally situated, and therefore contingent and conditional. Because our perceptions and thus our pronouncements are subjective (mind-dependent), there are no universal truths. Religious claims are not exempt from these epistemological limitations. Therefore, Christianity must recognize and respect its inherent “higher ignorance.”

Second, religious language points beyond itself to the transcendent, the depth dimension of life that beckons us beyond the ordinary and lures us into new horizons of meaning. Hence, faith only glimpses divine presence. It neither apprehends nor comprehends the fullness of God (the name for this Ultimate Mystery). Because all human insights into the holy are doubly mediated, religious formu-

lations are always approximations—not to be mistaken for God or “The Truth.”

Third, there exists a qualitative difference between humans and the divine. We are not God, and God is not us. Even the doctrine of the incarnation does not exhaust the meaning of the holy. The theological bottom line is explicit: God cannot be captured and contained in human expressions.

Because the three cases of category confusion cited in this essay violate these foundational principles, they are misguided attempts to resolve the challenges of the Enlightenment. A more responsible reply would be to accept both the insights of the Enlightenment and the tenets of Christian theology: human thoughts are limited *and* the divine is accessible yet ineffable.

Embracing those precepts means, first and foremost, renouncing any evidence-based mode of verifying theological truth claims. Distinct from science’s so-called “hard” truth,¹⁴ religious truth is “higher” truth in the sense that it is “beyond” empirical validation.¹⁵ In other words, theological assertions about the meaning of life are made by the living who possess no vantage point outside of their embodied lives by which their declarations can be assessed. Unlike scientific investigation into the meaning of the various parts of this sensible world, religious inquiry addresses the totality of life and is therefore fundamentally different. Because humans cannot (literally) get outside of themselves or occupy a standpoint outside of life, religious individuals must resort to imagination. The paradox of faith is that it makes claims about the wholeness of life that can be neither proven nor disproven, since people cannot occupy a context larger than life by which religious assertions can be evaluated. Thus, theological claims must be “taken on faith.”¹⁶


Second, religious truth is “higher” truth because it necessarily employs symbols and metaphors, myth and fiction to convey its meaning. Since the ultimate referent of religious expression is revealed in but not limited to history, it cannot be reduced to human statements or finite objects in this world. To equate the form of religious representation with the content of the religious referent (to make them one and the same) commits the heresy of idolatry. Creeds and confessions, scriptures and sacraments are socially constructed products of the Christian imagination that (at their best) point beyond themselves. In the words of Phyllis Trible, “To appropriate the metaphor of a Zen sutra, poetry is ‘like a finger pointing to the moon’ . . . To equate the finger with the moon or to acknowledge the finger and not perceive the moon is to miss the point.”¹⁷

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Religious truth is “higher” truth because it necessarily employs symbols and metaphors, myth and fiction to convey its meaning.

Third, religious truth is “higher” truth because it is fiction, not fact.¹⁸ Unlike science that seeks fact-based truth, religion pursues meaning-based truth. The former describes and explains “what is” in the world, while the latter expresses what things “mean” in the world. Because facts neither speak for nor interpret themselves, they exist without meaning. They are meaningless until scientists impute meaning to them via models of interpretation. On a different scale, humans utilize poetry, symbol, and myth to create holistic systems of meaning or “higher” truth.

So, stories, not statistics, are the requisite vehicles by which humans understand and transmit their deepest values and visions. Even though fiction is nonfactual, it can be true. However, both the church dropout and the church literalist are troubled that Christian truth rests on socially constructed fictions. The former dismisses them as fairy tales since they are void of evidence-based truth, while the latter dismisses them as blasphemous since they are void of divinely authored truth. Neither concedes that people can never possess nonfictional representations of Ultimate Mystery. Religious truth is “higher” truth because “fiction is not the problem, but the point.”¹⁹

In conclusion, humans must employ fiction when we think, speak, and write about the holy. Although we relentlessly and tenaciously aspire for meaning in life, our “higher ignorance” must temper any absolute claim that we attribute to our particular iteration of “higher” truth. We should never equate our version of “higher” truth with “The Truth.” Consequently, the goal of the Christian life is to live inside the Christian fiction as if it were true. And that takes trust! 

Notes

1. “Our View,” *USA Today*, September 25, 2012, 10A.
2. These quotations are taken from the author’s transcription of the online audio program.
3. The Enlightenment refers to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Western philosophical and cultural movement in which reason was employed as the primary source of authority and knowledge, traditional and religious ideas were challenged, and the scientific method was advanced.
4. This section on the four factors is based on Jones, *Seven Deadly Secrets*, 17–33.

5. This concept is attributed to Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.
6. Quoted in Jones, *The Church’s Seven Deadly Secrets*, 18.
7. This section on “faith and belief” is based on Jones, *Seven Deadly Secrets*, 35–55.
8. Quoted in Armstrong, *Battle for God*, 248.
9. Armstrong, *Battle for God*, 249.
10. Quoted in Copan, ed., *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?*, 24.
11. Tuckett, “Jesus and the Gospels,” 73.
12. These comments on faith and doubt are dependent on Jones, *Seven Deadly Secrets*, 51–53.
13. Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 18.
14. Scientific “hard” truths are never final since new discoveries can elicit new theories of explanation, and even new paradigms of interpretation.
15. To avoid the common misperception that science and religion are mutually exclusive because they compete for “truth” in the same domain of knowledge, I have intentionally not contrasted science as “hard” truth and religion as “soft” truth or science as “lower” truth and religion as “higher” truth. Rather, I attempt only to describe their two distinct domains of inquiry.
16. This observation is indebted to Kronman, *Education’s End*, 32–33.
17. Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 16.
18. Some of these comments are based on Miller, “The Truth of the Christian Fiction,” 97–100.
19. Galston, “What Makes Us Christian,” 19.

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The Church’s Seven Deadly Secrets

Identity Theft from Within

Paul H. Jones

2012—\$25, 240 pages
Paperback: 978-1-59815-113-8
E-book: 978-1-59815-114-5



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