

Can Faith Be Empirical?¹

I. Introduction

Two fundamental questions in the study of science and Christian belief concern faith and empiricism. Can a religious mode of believing also be an empirical mode of believing? What are the empirical characteristics of Christian faith specifically?

William James speaks in favor of empirical faith: “Let empiricism once become associated with religion, as hitherto, through some strange misunderstanding, it has been associated with irreligion, and I believe that a new era of religion as well as of philosophy will be ready to begin.”² Similarly, the Dalai Lama, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Allama Iqbal, Eliezer Berkovits, and C. S. Lewis—notable twentieth-century philosophers representing the religions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity³—concur that their religious doctrines are truths we can know through experience. Their analyses, if correct, show that religion is thoroughly compatible with empirical modes of belief, give arguments for the possibility of religious empirical knowledge, and show that Christianity measures up well by empirical epistemological standards. Moreover, its doctrines even admit of the possibility of verification and falsification, and it is not reliance on faith so much as the particular method of testing which distinguishes Christian belief from science.

There is more than one sense of the word “empiricism.” The theory that all our ideas originate in sensory experience is called “empiricism,”⁴ as is the tradition in early modern British philosophy that was devoted to this idea.⁵ James is talking about three other things. One is the *descriptive* theory that we get knowledge from experience—and that not limited to *sensory* experience. Another is the *normative* theory that, since we get knowledge from experience, we should submit our beliefs to rigorous scrutiny in light of evidence from experience. Finally, there

is the way of life of someone who tries to *follow* that normative theory. I am interested in these senses of “empiricism,” especially the latter two. It seems to me—following James and these others—that we may identify three major characteristics of a person whose thought life is marked by empiricism: Her beliefs are adopted based on evidence from experience, she seeks to test her beliefs in future experience, and she holds her beliefs with a degree of caution in case future experience should turn up evidence against them. If Lewis et al know anything much about their respective religions, then these religions are highly compatible with empiricism. Religious belief can be based on empirical evidence, can seek and respond to experiences that support or undermine it, and can be held tentatively in case future experience should reveal evidence against it. Even dogmatic religious faith can be empirical, although there is a degree of tension between a fully empirical attitude and a faith which is “dogmatic” in the sense of an absolute or unquestioned commitment.

Of course, some religious traditions consider experience a source of knowledge alongside and sometimes, as in traditional Methodism, subservient to authoritative sources of knowledge. Although this demonstrates some degree of consistency between religious belief and empiricism, my concern is with the direct overlap of empirical attitudes and a posture of faith in particular testimonies of religious authority; a religious belief (or a system of religious beliefs) which is accepted by faith can *also* be accepted empirically, and Christianity is no exception. The fact that some religious traditions use experience as an *additional* source of knowledge or as a means of better understanding knowledge derived from faith is beside the point. Moreover, I will not delve into the contemporary literature on the epistemology of religious experience. William Alston, Richard Swinburne, Kai Man Kwan, and others have done some fine work on the idea that religious experience can be a source of rational belief or even knowledge.⁶ Others have

considered the commonalities of science and theology.⁷ One additional thing is needful in the defense of the Christian faith. We could do with a direct look at the twentieth-century philosophers who represented the world's great religions in their encounters with modern empiricism as they consider these three characteristics of empiricism. This article considers their insights, with a little help from Augustine and James. I will begin with Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. Then I will show that Christianity can have these three aspects of empiricism and explain some of the salient empirical features of Christian theology. Lastly, in a concluding section, I will summarize and offer some clarifications of my position.

II. Eastern Religions, Islam, and Judaism

We begin with the Dalai Lama and Radhakrishnan, philosophers representing Buddhism and Hinduism and pointing to the origin of religious belief in experience, efforts to test it, and tentativeness in case future experience should turn up evidence against it. Radhakrishnan has an interesting analysis of how that testing works—following, he says, a two-step process of logical investigation and application to future experience. Moreover, both treat their religious beliefs as entirely subject to modification in light of future experience since nothing in their religious beliefs is fixed; the doctrines to which they are committed may be modified without the religion changing in any crucial way.

In a speech on what Buddhism and neuroscience can do for each other, the Dalai Lama says that Buddhism has always recognized experience as a source of knowledge overriding all others: “. . . in the Buddhist investigative tradition, between the three recognized sources of knowledge—experience, reason and testimony—it is the evidence of the experience that takes precedence, with reason coming second and testimony last.”⁸ A thorough empiricism is always

open to old conclusions, including the most important religious doctrines, being corrected by future experience.⁹

Representing the Hindu tradition is Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, a philosopher-king in the twentieth century—or at least a philosopher who was President of India. Radhakrishnan explains that Hinduism has no “fixed intellectual beliefs,” but always subordinates “dogma to experience.”¹⁰ Faith is a kind of “spiritual perception,” fallible and in need of testing.¹¹ All deliverances of perception are subject to a twofold testing process; after being sifted through logic, they are sent back to experience for further testing.¹² Radhakrishnan claims that even the most sacred Hindu scriptures, the Vedas, do not give us any non-negotiable belief; such fixed doctrine as Hinduism possesses is not *in* the Vedas, but *about* them—the doctrine that they are records of spiritual perceptions: “They are not so much dogmatic dicta as transcripts from life. They record the spiritual experiences of souls strongly endowed with the sense for reality. They . . . express the experiences of the experts in the field of religion.”¹³ (Similarly, a scientist may take it as unquestioned dogma that the data in a report on an experiment really do originate in the experiences of the scientist performing it.) We have an inalienable “right to inquire and sift the evidence.”¹⁴ The Vedic doctrines derive from experience, and are subjected to the test of future experience: “The truths revealed in the Vedas are capable of being re-experienced,” and we can test them “by means of logic but also through life.”¹⁵ In sum, “The Hindu philosophy of religion starts from and returns to an experimental basis”¹⁶

Simply put, even the most thoroughgoing empiricism poses no problem for a religious outlook lacking both essential and unquestioned doctrines. That’s no problem for the Dalai Lama or Radhakrishnan, nor for some western dogma-less religious outlooks such as those of

Unitarianism, John Dewey in *A Common Faith*,¹⁷ and James, who tells us that empiricists consider all religious doctrines subject to correction by later experience.¹⁸

We now turn to Abrahamic religions. Allama Iqbal, representing Islam, argues that religious knowledge can be rooted in experience. Eliezer Berkovits represents Judaism and focuses on the particular experiences of the historical events at Sinai. Berkovits suggests that this sort of religious belief may be confirmed in *future* experience.

A brief word of introduction: Sir Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), a British knight and national poet of Pakistan, wrote poetry in Urdu and Persian, wrote philosophy in Persian and English, and is the only major philosopher I know of after whom an international airport has been named (Allama Iqbal International in Lahore, Pakistan). Iqbal argues that experience may encounter divine reality, resulting in the data necessary for empirical religious knowledge. Iqbal's *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* attempts to integrate the insights of modern science and religious mysticism, especially Sufism. Knowledge, he says, is born of reflection based on experience. Scientific knowledge is born of reflection on sensory experience, and religious knowledge is born of reflection on religious experience. He says, "The facts of religious experience are facts among other facts of human experience and, in the capacity of yielding knowledge by interpretation, one fact is as good as another."¹⁹

Here is a more formal reconstruction of Iqbal's argument:

1. Science is a branch of knowledge.
2. That which is knowledge has sufficient warrant to be knowledge.
3. Science derives its warrant from a combination of experience and reflection on experience.

4. So experience and reflection on experience is a possible source of sufficient warrant for knowledge.

5. There is such a thing as religious experience that can be reflected on.

6. So religious experience and reflection on it is a possible source of sufficient warrant for knowledge.

Iqbal's premises, if true, are good reason to think his conclusion is true. One possible objection is that there may be no such thing as experience with a divine reality: So-called "religious" experiences are mere delusions! It seems to me that we may let experience determine whether this is the case; more precisely, whether at least some of the experiences people call "religious" are actual encounters with a divine reality should be determined by considering those experiences.²⁰ Prior to that investigation, we need merely take Iqbal's argument as aiming at the *possibility* of an experience of the divine, and rephrase premise 5: *It is possible that there is such a thing as an experience in which a human being encounters a divine reality and that this experience can be reflected on.*

Of course, we need not be talking about one's *own* experience. Scientific knowledge draws from experience, but most of us rely on the experiences of others for our scientific knowledge. Non-professional scientists rely entirely on the experiences of others for their scientific knowledge, but can still have knowledge from science. I know, for example, that electrons exist and that polio vaccinations prevent polio. Even a professional scientist relies largely on the experiences of others (on which more anon).

There is another objection in the area: Mystical or subjective religious experiences are not accessible to all observers. Fair enough. Insofar as Iqbal's argument pertains to such experiences, this would limit the degree of warrant available for the resulting beliefs. Now Iqbal

is not talking about the *testing* of religious belief, but about its experiential *origins*. More importantly for our purposes, his argument is not relevant only to mystical or subjective experiences; the experiences of God alleged by the Abrahamic religions are for the most part historical events in which humans encountered the divine, often recognizing it as such by accompanying miracles.

This leads us to Berkovits. In a 1961 article Berkovits asks, “What is Jewish philosophy?”²¹ He explains that there is a “common denominator”²² in genuinely Jewish philosophy—the building of its doctrines “not on ideas but on certain facts and events.”²³ These include the Exodus, the giving of the Torah at Sinai, and the establishing of the Hebrew nation.²⁴ These are historical facts, “events themselves having occurred, the facts having entered into history”²⁵ These historical experiences are the foundation of the Jewish religion. Judaism is not *a priori*. So also in his *God, Man, and History* (1959), Berkovits explains that “The foundation of religion is not the affirmation that God *is*, but that God is concerned with man and the world”²⁶ We can *know* that God is concerned “by the appropriate proof,” which is not “metaphysical”²⁷ but empirical: We know by our experience of God’s help in response to our entreating.²⁸ The same empirical pattern pertains to God’s existence, relevance, Word, and instructions. It even involves sensory perception: “At Sinai, you knew God . . . by actual experience, in which all of your senses were involved.”²⁹

Berkovits suggests that the biblical encounter with God is not merely a historical event. The occurrence at Sinai is fixed history, but the same God may be experienced today: “that ‘the Eternal, he is God’ is revealed in an event, that this knowledge was experienced—and that it remains capable of being experienced—is of course what is meant by ‘the living God,’ Judaism’s

incomparable discovery.”³⁰ The idea here seems to be that religious knowledge may be verified in contemporary experience, to which we will return later.

III. Christianity

Christian theology will not entail quite the same epistemology as other religions. Christianity presumes a verbal revelation from God; Christians expect, as John 1:18 says, to know God through Jesus Christ; and so on. Others have studied the particularities of biblical and Christian epistemology.³¹ Yet the epistemological particularities of Christianity do not preclude that Christian theology has the empirical traits of rootedness in past experience, the seeking of testing in future experience, and a degree of tentativeness in case future experience should disconfirm the beliefs. In this section I will first review the idea that knowledge, including empirical knowledge, can be faith. Then I will explain how Christian theology can have these traits of empiricism.

A. Knowledge, Including Empirical Knowledge, Depends on Faith

It is an old idea that an article of faith can be an instance of knowledge. Besides James and our other thinkers, Thomas Torrance has written of the commonalities between science and theology as studies dealing with our experience of objective reality.³² This is very proper. However, one crucial point is best made by considering Augustine—that trust in authority can be a source of knowledge, and is indeed a source of empirical knowledge on which science no less than Christian theology is reliant.

Faith is trust. This is the first definition in the English dictionary,³³ and the Latin *fides* and the Greek *pistis* concur. Faith and knowledge overlap because belief based on a reliable authority can be an instance of both faith *and* knowledge.

It is helpful to keep in mind that arguments from authority are not necessarily fallacious. They are good or bad depending on their content, and most importantly on whether it is reasonable to suppose that the authority really has the expertise presumed by the argument.³⁴ An argument from a *reliable* authority speaking within his area of expertise is generally a good argument, and any other argument from authority a bad one. We must also remember that science is not the epistemological opposite of faith: one relying entirely on reason, one not at all. We may set aside the argument that science is not a matter of objective reason alone³⁵ and even the fact that religious faith often relies on reason to varying degrees.³⁶ The crucial point is that science, like a typical religion, depends on faith—*on trust*.

Of course, scientific experiments can be repeated; in principle at least, all of the data supporting scientific knowledge can be tested, much of it *is* tested, and many scientists have done some of the testing themselves. By and large, however, science relies on trust; no individual scientist has tested enough data *not* to. Nor would he have time to do so, nor would it be prudent thus to use his time if he did. Say a chemist wants to know chemistry without relying on trust at all; he will have to begin *from the very beginning* and repeat *all* of the experiments that led to the current state of chemical knowledge *multiple times each*. He would likely die of old age before catching up with the present state of chemical knowledge. His hard work would be useless unless others were willing to take his word for it at least *some* of the time when he said that his experiments had turned out the way they had.

Thus scientific knowledge, even for scientists, relies heavily on trust in the testimony of reliable witnesses. The rest of us are entirely dependent on their testimony for our scientific knowledge. The same is true of other areas of knowledge, as Augustine shows.³⁷ In *history*, we know by trust that Socrates died in Athens after being condemned by the Athenian jury. In

geography, we know that Harare, Zimbabwe, exists; most readers of this article know it only by trust; although *I* have been to Harare, I rely on trust for my knowledge of the existence of Moscow. In the category of *social and familial* knowledge, I know who my parents are by faith alone. If I underwent DNA testing, my knowledge would still depend on trust, unless, like our incredulous chemist, I were to spend my entire life collecting the data and replicating the experiments underlying genetic science!

In short, faith, or trust, is a necessary source (or, rather, a conveyor) of knowledge, and a major source (or conveyor) of empirical knowledge. Accordingly, insofar as it is possible to experience God or any other reality in which religious belief is interested, trust in this testimony can be an empirical source (or conveyor) of *religious* knowledge. That this is so is, as we have seen, said by some religious philosophers. We now turn to the same themes in C. S. Lewis.

B. Christian Theology Is Rooted in Experience

Perhaps the most influential twentieth-century Christian philosopher, Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity* of the sources of Christian doctrine in experience. He says:

And that is how Theology started. People already knew about God in a vague way. Then came a man who claimed to be God; and yet he was not the sort of man you could dismiss as a lunatic. He made them believe Him. They met Him again after they had seen Him killed. And then, after they had been formed into a little society or community, they found God somehow inside them as well: directing them, making them able to do things they could not do before. And when they worked it all out they found they had arrived at the Christian definition of the three-personal God.³⁸

The essential doctrines of Christianity have an empirical basis: the experiences of those who knew the living, miracle-working, crucified, and resurrected Messiah of the Hebrew religion.

That itself is a rather important experience of the divine.³⁹ Its power to contribute to empirical religious knowledge is compounded by the daily religious experience of the community of early Messiah-followers. Notice how Lewis parallels Berkovits in placing the origins of religious knowledge in historical events, and also on knowing the same God after those historical events had passed. Notice how Lewis' account mirrors Iqbal's claim that reflection on religious experience can produce knowledge: "when they worked it all out" they had discovered knowledge of the Trinity. Warrant rooted in reflection on experience of the divine is precisely the origin of Christian theology. Iqbal shows that religious belief can be rooted in experience, and he gives a criterion for its being knowledge; Lewis shows that Christian belief has that origin and meets that criterion. In short, despite differences in history, culture, and theology, these three religious philosophers are working with very similar ideas, and their conclusions converge on the empirical respectability of religious belief, with all emphasizing its experiential origin, Lewis and Iqbal emphasizing reflection on experience, and Lewis and Berkovits emphasizing historical events and a religious community's continuing encounters with the God responsible for those events.

In our day we are heirs to the historical testimony, not ourselves eyewitnesses. Still, as we have seen, empirical knowledge typically depends in large part on trust in eyewitnesses. The biblical events of which Lewis speaks are not things we believe without knowledge just because our belief relies on the testimony of witnesses. Rather, as Augustine shows, the origin of Christian theology in eyewitness testimony would confirm that we *can* have knowledge here, just as I can have scientific, historical, geographical, and familial and social knowledge derived from eyewitness testimony. And Christian theology *does* have such origins, as others have shown.⁴⁰

A third source of empirical warrant for Christian theology is easily incorporated into Lewis' account. The experiences of the Hebrew prophets and their hearers resulted in a number of detailed predictions of the Messiah which the early church understood fit their own experiences of the Messiah (as Paul points out; 1 Cor. 15:4).

C. Christian Knowledge Can Be Tested

One possible weakness of religious empirical knowledge confronts us. All else being equal, a belief derived from experience which *cannot* be tested is less secure than a belief which *can*. Its truth is less probable; it has a lesser degree of warrant, and if it is knowledge then it is a poorer sort of knowledge.

By way of comparison, *my* knowledge of science, since I am not a scientist, depends entirely on trust. But a professional scientist's scientific knowledge is not dependent *entirely* on trust, for she does some testing on her own. Moreover, *my* scientific knowledge has the advantage that it is usually not reliant on trust in only a few, but relies on many who have replicated the relevant experiments. Moreover, if I should ever want to test my knowledge, I may be able to replicate some of the experiments myself, or have someone I trust do it for me.

In short, knowledge derived from experience is better off if it can be tested. Can religious empirical knowledge be tested? Can Christian theology be tested? Yes. Before explaining why, it will first be necessary to summarize my own working views of the nature of empirical warrant in science, which I consider to involve distinct processes of verification and falsification. Then I will consider the verification of Christian theology, showing that some points of Christian theology can be subjected to tests for verification. Next, I will consider the falsification of Christian theology, showing that certain doctrines can be subjected to tests for falsification.

Accordingly, Christian belief can have that second characteristic of empiricism, that its adherents seek warrant for their beliefs in future experience. In Radhakrishnan's terms, Christian theology is drawn from experience and may be tested logically before being returned to experience for confirmation.

1. The Forms of Scientific Warrant

Science is a highly refined method of gaining empirical knowledge, and it makes a helpful comparison for other varieties of empirical belief. The nature of scientific reasoning is a major topic of discussion in the philosophy of science, and I will not attempt to bring any disputes to a close here.⁴¹ A brief statement of my own working understanding will suffice for our purposes. Roughly, science is the practice of learning about the world through observing, theorizing, conducting controlled experiments, and revising. A genuinely scientific theory is one which does not fit all possible accumulations of data based on sensory experience. The experimental component of scientific practice brings a theory into contact with experiences and relevant data likely to *fit* it (if the theory is correct) or *not* fit it (if it turns out to be incorrect). The predictions one can make on the basis of a theory are especially useful in identifying what sort of data are relevant.

There are, however, distinct ways a theory may be tested against a set of relevant data; it may be either verified or falsified. Roughly, verification is what happens when a scientist finds new data that fit a theory, and falsification is what happens when she finds new data that do *not*. The former is the finding of evidence *for* it, the latter the finding of evidence *against*. Although it is no doubt possible to test some theories for verification and falsification at the same time, not every theory can be both falsified and verified by the same test, if it can be both verified and falsified at all. The theory that the Vikings never visited the Punjab could be falsified by new

archaeological evidence, say by the remains of a Viking longboat on the banks of the Indus, but it cannot be verified in this way. The theory that the Vikings *did* visit Canada can easily be verified by archaeological evidence, but would be very difficult to falsify. Moreover, a theory that can be subjected to tests for falsification and verification at the same time may be verified but not yet falsified—as was that well-known example, the theory that all swans are white, for quite some time.

Although Thomas Kuhn does not believe in absolute falsification,⁴² I need not come to terms with this question. The mere finding of strong evidence against a theory is close enough to the falsifying of it for the purposes of my analysis of empiricism and faith. The important point is simply that distinct processes take place in the empirical testing of a theory against relevant data: confirmation from the data (what I am, perhaps a bit loosely, calling “verification”), and disconfirmation (“falsification”).

2. Verification

So verification and falsification are distinct processes, and both are important to empirical testing. Can Christian knowledge derived from experience be either verified or falsified? It can. Here I will first explain one important characteristic of the verification of some religious beliefs, a point explained nicely by James and Lewis. Then I will consider Lewis’ remarks on the verification of religious belief in corporate religious experience and, lastly, the verifiability of religious belief in historical claims.

James explains one reason the verification of religious belief might be possible, but might not proceed in the same manner as the verification of scientific knowledge:

The more perfect and more eternal aspect of the universe is represented in our religions as having personal form. . . . and any relation that may be possible from person to person

might be possible here. . . . We feel, too, as if the appeal of religion to us were made to our own active good-will, as if evidence might be forever withheld from us unless we met the hypothesis half-way. To take a trivial illustration: just as a man who in a company of gentlemen made no advances, asked a warrant for every concession, and believed no one's word without proof, would cut himself off by such churlishness from all the social rewards that a more trusting spirit would earn—so here, one who should shut himself up in snarling logicity and try to make the gods extort his recognition willy-nilly, or not get it at all, might cut himself off forever from his only opportunity of making the gods' acquaintance.⁴³

Religious truth might be verifiable after all, but under certain conditions. God, like any other person, might require us to trust more than the currently available evidence requires. Yet this may be only temporary. The evidence may come from God, as it did from Shakespeare's Beatrice to Benedick and from him to her, *after* our belief in it—perhaps even *because of* our belief in it.

Lewis independently reached the same insight, concurring in James' use of the analogy from human persons to divine:

Theology is, in a sense, an experimental science. . . . I mean that it is like the other experimental sciences in some ways, but not in all. If you are a geologist studying rocks, you have to go and find the rocks. They will not come to you, and if you go to them they cannot run away. The initiative lies all on your side. . . . But suppose you are a zoologist . . . That is a bit different from studying rocks. The wild animals will not come to you: but they can run away from you. Unless you keep very quiet, they will. There is beginning to be a tiny little trace of initiative on their side.

Now a stage higher; suppose you want to get to know a human person. If he is determined not to let you, you will not get to know him. You have to win his confidence. In this case the initiative is equally divided—it takes two to make a friendship.

When you come to knowing God, the initiative lies on His side.⁴⁴

This is one of the key differences between science and religion. Science depends on replicable experiments, which works best when there is the possibility of some degree of control over that which is being tested. Human control over divine reality is just not possible. So it would be a mistake to say that scientific belief differs from religious belief simply because one is subject to testing and one is not; rather, one is normally subject to *controlled* testing, and the other is not.

Lewis extends the analogy, saying that God will not verify knowledge of himself to just any man. God cannot “show Himself to a man whose whole mind and character are in the wrong condition.”⁴⁵ Lewis:

You can put this another way by saying that while in other sciences the instruments you use are things external to yourself (things like microscopes and telescopes), the instrument through which you see God is your whole self. And if a man’s self is not kept clean and bright, his glimpse of God will be blurred—like the Moon seen through a dirty telescope.⁴⁶

God’s initiative in verifying religious belief depends in part on the state of those trying to verify it. Willingness to believe is not enough if we want to know God in present experience; we also have to be *good*. Lewis explains that man, made in the image of God, can know God best when they—no longer *he*, but *they*—are living like they are meant to:

God can show Himself as He really is only to real men. And that means not simply to men who are individually good, but to men who are united together in a body, loving one

another, helping one another, showing Him to one another. For that is what God meant humanity to be like; like players in one band, or organs in one body.⁴⁷

Lewis thus suggests another key difference between science and religion. Not only is religion less subject to *controlled* testing than science usually is, but the verification of religious belief can only be successfully attempted by a holy and loving community. Verification of scientific knowledge rarely if ever depends on any moral qualities of a community of scientists.

Verification takes place—in the life of the church when it is living holily. They will perceive that God exists in their communal Christian experience: “Consequently, the one really adequate instrument for learning about God, is the whole Christian community, waiting for Him together. Christian brotherhood is, so to speak, the technical equipment for this science—the laboratory outfit.”⁴⁸ In this holy life the community of believers experience God; and that experience fits their religious faith. To be precise, under these conditions their experience provides data consistent with their religious beliefs. As Berkovits says, the living God is one we may still encounter.

Finally, the historical aspect of some religions opens them up to a considerable degree of verifiability. This is particularly salient to the Abrahamic traditions, many of whose historical claims are open to a significant degree of verification from relevant data sets accumulated from history or archaeology. Insofar as these religions *entail* these historical claims, then, those religions are at least partially verifiable. And insofar as an adherent of such a religion takes such claims on faith, those particulars of her faith are verifiable. Various points of Christian belief are verifiable, and many have been verified, from the existence of the Hittite empire to the biblical characters whose tombs have been discovered.

3. Falsification

Can Christian theology be falsified? I think so, for at least two reasons. First, universal claims made by religious theories of inerrancy or infallibility open up these religious views to falsifying counterexamples. Second, those religions which include or rely on historical claims are often falsifiable by historical or archaeological data. The central claim of the Christian religion, the Resurrection of Jesus the Messiah, is a particularly striking example of a falsifiable religious doctrine.

The doctrine, particularly important to various branches of the Abrahamic religions, of an infallible or inerrant authority is falsifiable. Perhaps not every strictly theological or moral claim made by a religious authority is falsifiable. Consider, however, that the doctrine that an authority is inerrant constitutes a universal denial of *any* errors in that particular authority. Such a doctrine is falsifiable if only that authority should make a disprovable claim about something which can be empirically investigated. Within Christianity *alone*, this opens up at least two major doctrines to the possibility of falsification: the doctrine of biblical inerrancy and the Roman Catholic doctrine of magisterial infallibility.

Take biblical inerrancy. Though it goes back at least as far as the Church Fathers,⁴⁹ it has more recently been presented as the doctrine that the Bible is without error according to its original meaning, that being located within the intentions of the human authors.⁵⁰ But if that intent includes any falsifiable claim, such as one that might possibly conflict with modern science, then not only *that* claim but *the entire doctrine* of biblical inerrancy is falsifiable.

Indeed, many believe that the doctrine of biblical inerrancy has *already been falsified*. They think it is disproven by the incompatibility of one or more biblical teachings and the findings of science. Let us look at one typical example. Inerrancy may be falsified against a set of data pertaining to the Hebrew language, ancient literature, and geology. All that is required for

falsification is that that particular set of data strongly supports two propositions: that the original meaning of Genesis 1-3 is that the earth was created by God in a mere six days, and that the earth itself is in fact far too old to have been created in a mere six days.⁵¹ For the record, I myself do not think that that set of data supports both of these claims; I do not think that the doctrine of biblical inerrancy has been falsified. However, I am in agreement with those who think that science *has* falsified biblical inerrancy in thinking that the logical *possibility* of this sort of thing is entailed by the meaning of inerrancy.

By the same reasoning, any other claim of infallibility in a Holy Book, a prophet of God, or the theological or moral pronouncements of a Church or a Pope is likewise falsifiable—if only that authority makes some claims intersecting with science, history, or any other field where empirical data may conflict with those claims.

Finally, and more generally, any historical religious claim, such as is common in the Abrahamic religions, which can fail to fit some accumulation of relevant archaeological or historical data is falsifiable. Insofar as such a religion *entails* such a historical claim, the religion *itself* is falsifiable. And any such religious claim is a falsifiable religious belief for anyone who takes that particular belief on faith.

The Christian Gospel includes one particularly important historical claim: the Resurrection of Jesus the Messiah, identified by Paul in 1 Cor. 15 as the *sine qua non* of the Christian faith. Remarkably, this central doctrine is eminently falsifiable. It always has been *in principle*: All it takes is persuasive evidence of the bones of Jesus in some tomb. It is falsifiable *in practice*, though it would be difficult to find and confirm right set of bones after all this time. In the earliest days the falsification of this doctrine would seem to have been remarkably easy. To be precise, the Resurrection survives *this* test for falsification: *Did Jesus' judges and*

*executioners produce the body or, if his ragtag band of followers had overcome the national and imperial peacekeeping apparatus and made off with the body, did they extract its location by bribes or torture and then locate and display it?*⁵²

This test is still relevant. True, this particular test for falsification is reliant on the lack of such falsifying evidence in the historical record. This diminishes the strength of the test by making it dependent on trust in the currently available historical sources. This, however, does *not* mean the test is insignificant; after all, I can know the falsity of the proposition “All swans are white” although I myself have not seen a black swan and rely on the testimony of others. What diminishes the strength of this test for falsification is *not* that our knowledge of how the test went relies on *trust*. What diminishes its strength is that what we learn from that trust is difficult to verify and that this particular test for falsification is impossible to *repeat*. All else being equal, a test for falsification which *can* be repeated and whose results are easily verified is better than one which lacks these characteristics. All the same, this particular test is significant.

In summary, religious beliefs rooted in experience can be subjected to future testing, although not to tests that can be performed by an individual tester regardless of moral character, or to repeatable and controllable tests like a typical scientific theory.⁵³ This testing may provide verification, or perhaps falsification. Accordingly, not only does Christian theology derive largely from experience, but it also can also have a second major characteristic of empiricism: It can be held by one who seeks to test and, hopefully, confirm these beliefs in future experience. Since various Christian beliefs are verifiable or falsifiable, a Christian can easily approach future experience with the possibility of this testing in mind.

D. Christian Theology Can Be Held Tentatively

A third characteristic of empiricism is that an empiricist believes with a degree of caution, mindful of the possibility that future experience will produce evidence against his beliefs. Christian faith can have this characteristic of empiricism. Here we must confront the objection that a religion with dogmas cannot have this trait of empiricism. Let us first review some of the available senses of the word “dogma,” then look at the limited compatibility of empiricism and the unquestioning acceptance of or absolute commitment to Christian theology, and finally look at the full compatibility of empiricism and Christian dogma in the sense of a settled, accepted, or official belief.

“Dogma” can mean different things. Three uses are particularly relevant for our investigation, those suggesting irrational belief, stubborn and unquestioning belief, and settled or official belief. For example, we see in *Merriam-Webster* that a “dogma” might be “a point of view or tenet put forth as authoritative without adequate grounds,” the result of trust without reason.⁵⁴ (The derivatives of “dogmatism” and “dogmatic” often have this connotation of irrational or unreasoned belief.) Alternatively, and turning to Dictionary.com, we see that “dogma” can mean “prescribed doctrine proclaimed as unquestionably true by a particular group.”⁵⁵ Or, returning to *Merriam-Webster*, “dogma” might simply be “something held as an established opinion,” i.e. an official or established teaching.⁵⁶

Christianity, of course, is a religion with dogmas; but does that mean irrational trust, unquestioning belief, or established teaching? Based on what we have already seen, plainly not irrational trust. Suppose that Christianity is “dogmatic” in the sense of requiring an absolute commitment—a commitment to beliefs objections to which I am rigidly refusing to entertain. A thoroughgoing empiricism will hold beliefs tentatively. This sort of “dogmatism” would rule out such tentativeness (and with it one motivation to seek more evidence in future experience). Yet

this sort of religious belief may have a strongly empirical aspect. Such a dogmatic believer might simply think that his religion requires an absolute commitment to a given doctrine which happens to be warranted by the empirical evidence. He might conclude that the empirical evidence warrants acceptance of the belief yet also conclude that the nature of the doctrine requires a commitment with no turning back, perhaps an absolute commitment *beyond* that which is strictly warranted by the evidence. (This, I think, was one of Kierkegaard's points about faith and reason—not that Christianity is unreasonable but that it requires a total commitment when reason at its best can provide only partial evidence.) Such an attitude to faith may be compared to marriage. A young man might consider the proposition “Miss S. R. is the woman who should be my wife” to have a 93% probability as warranted by the empirical evidence. But Miss S. R. might require a total commitment and a whole ring, not 93% of a ring and 93% of a commitment! He may eagerly wish to test his beliefs about Miss S. R. but still consider the vow, once entered, to stick to the marriage till death parts them to be unbreakable. Similarly, religious commitment can be “dogmatic” in this sense, and largely empirical. Such a believer may seek to *test* his beliefs in future experience. He may simply believe that, once the commitment is made, there is no turning back.

Alternatively, let us consider that third sense of the term “dogma,” which may be more properly applied to Christianity. The point of saying that a religion has dogmas, after all, is not necessarily that its adherents are not allowed to *question* their theology; it may only be that if they should *reject* certain points of their theology, then they will no longer be members of that religion! In other words, Christian dogma is simply settled or fixed belief. A believer could say, “I accept the teachings of the Nicene Creed / the Roman Magisterium / the Westminster Confession / the Baptist Faith and Message. I am not *certain* they are true, but I think they are

warranted by the empirical evidence. I suppose I could change my mind someday in light of new evidence.” In this sense of the term, a Christian’s faith can be entirely empirical, yet include dogmas.

In summary, Christian faith is fully compatible with that third characteristic of empiricism, that beliefs are held with a degree of caution in case future experience should turn up evidence against them. If we presume that Christian faith must be held unquestioningly, then one or the other would have to give at least a little. Between acceptance of this sort of religious “dogma” and this particular characteristic of empiricism, a tension remains.

IV. Conclusion

In short, evidence for religious belief may be rooted in experience to a degree comparable to other forms of empirical knowledge, reliance on faith being a point in common rather than a contrast between religion and other empirical varieties of belief. Religious knowledge may seek testing in future experience, albeit with limitations on the degree of control over the subject matter. Even dogmatic religion and empirical tentativeness are compatible. Christianity in particular remains a largely empirical theology in origins, content, and structure and is justified on empirical grounds by the epistemological analyses of Augustine, James, the Dalai Lama, Radhakrishnan, Iqbal, Berkovits, and Lewis. The commonalities in epistemic standards held by James and Lewis, by Lewis and Iqbal, by Iqbal and Radhakrishnan, and so on are empirical epistemic standards, and the arguments of these philosophers, if successful, justify Christian theology by those standards.

Now I do not think that religious belief is ever *entirely* empirical in its *origins*, or that any knowledge is. Gaining knowledge from experience relies, as David Hume showed,⁵⁷ on our knowing some principles (such as the legitimacy of inductive reasoning) which cannot

themselves be known from experience. Unlike Hume, and more like Thomas Reid,⁵⁸ I think we *do* know these principles. So I do not think of empirical knowledge as entirely independent of *non-empirical* knowledge, for it has non-empirical foundations. If we were to tweak the descriptive definition of empiricism from the introduction to this article so as to involve the claim that *all* knowledge derives from experience *alone*, then I would reject “empiricism.” Moreover, I am open to the possibility of religious knowledge that is warranted independently of the evidence (though not necessarily independently of experience), such as in our day Alvin Plantinga has described.⁵⁹

Nor do I claim that religious belief or knowledge is entirely empirical in its *structure*. Again, I doubt whether *any* knowledge is. Knowledge is a system, aptly described by some as a web. Warrant is transferred throughout the system in many ways, and enters the system at many points. Susan Haack has described this aspect of knowledge quite well,⁶⁰ John Zeis has applied her insights to religious knowledge,⁶¹ and I have summarized these matters elsewhere.⁶² Here I need only add that in a system of empirical knowledge some confirmation processes may be *non-empirical*. For example, the checking of a physicist’s mathematical equations for accuracy is a non-empirical process relevant to the confirmation of physics, which nevertheless is (on the whole) a system of empirical knowledge.

So also with faith. If, for example, an a priori argument for the existence of God, perhaps a version of the Ontological Argument, were to succeed, it would constitute a point of non-empirical confirmation of a system of religious knowledge—which system might nevertheless be largely empirical. Here, also, we may place one very important word of caution. Christian faith requires submission to the authority of Christ and of Scripture (and, some say, of the Church). Indeed, empirical evidence for Jesus as savior, God, and Messiah *requires* trust in him. Thus a

point of theology derived solely from such a theological authority is accepted by faith—yet not (or not directly) by experience.

In sum, although there are differences between religion and science, they do not amount to a dichotomy of religion and empiricism. Religious belief *can*, and often *does*, have the empirical traits of being rooted in past experience, tested in the present, and tentative. And, if these things are false, then so are the accounts of Buddhism given by the Dalai Lama, of Hinduism by Radhakrishnan, of Islam by Iqbal, of Judaism by Berkovits, and of Christianity by Lewis! Christianity in fact measures up well by these standards of empirical epistemology and even admits of a significant degree of verifiability and falsifiability. Discussions of science and Christian theology would benefit from keeping these matters well in mind.

¹ I am grateful to three anonymous reviewers for *Science and Christian Belief* for many helpful criticism and suggestions.

² William James. *A Pluralistic Universe*, Lecture VIII.

³ Such, at least, was their intention, and they seem to me to have been largely successful, although no doubt imperfect. (I have disagreed with Lewis myself on some points of Christian theology.)

⁴ In this paper I develop the ideas of the aforementioned philosophers and apply their empirical epistemological standards to Christian theology. Their positions presume that we human beings experience reality and can gain knowledge about reality from that experience. A closer look at the meaning, significance, and reasonableness of this presumption along with other debates about the nature of experience, the meaning of “empiricism,” and so on are outside the scope of this paper. The interested reader might begin to study these matters by consulting some of the following sources. For essays on the nature of philosophy, see Matthew Haug, Editor. *Philosophical Methodology: The Armchair or the Laboratory?*, London: Routledge (2013). On the idea that reality exists independently of our minds, see Alvin Plantinga. “How To Be An Anti-Realist,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 56.1 (September 1982), pp. 47-70, as well as John McDowell. *Mind and World*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1996). On twentieth-century and contemporary theories of empiricism, see Willard Van Orman Quine. “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” *The Philosophical Review* 60 (1951), pp. 20-43; George Bealer and P. F. Strawson. “The Incoherence of Empiricism,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 66 (1992), pp. 99-14; and Bas C. van Frassen. *The Empirical Stance*, New Haven: Yale University Press (2004).

⁵ Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Berkley, and Hume held that all our ideas, and hence all knowledge, derive from sensory perception—contrary to the epistemology of continental European rationalist philosophers like Leibniz and Descartes. Even after Kant tried to integrate the insights of rationalism and empiricism, traditions descended from empiricism continued to focus on the idea that knowledge comes from experience. Logical Positivism followed Hume and developed the idea that the only meaningful statements about a world outside the mind are those which can be tested in sensory experience. One notable idea from American Pragmatists such as James and Dewey is the expansion of the category of “experience” beyond mere sensory experience—an influence on my own views.

⁶ William Alston. *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, New York: Cornell University Press (1991). Richard Swinburne. *The Existence of God*, New York: Oxford University Press (1979). Kai-man Kwan. *The Rainbow of Experiences, Critical Trust, and God: A Defense of Holistic Empiricism*, New

York: Bloomsbury (2011). For a good introduction to this field, see Mark Webb. "Religious Experience" in The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2001); <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/religious-experience>, Section 3.

⁷ Such as Dru Johnson. Epistemology and Biblical Theology: From the Pentateuch to Mark's Gospel, New York: Routledge University Press (2018) and Biblical Knowing: a Scriptural Epistemology of Error, Eugene, OR: Cascade (2013). Also Thomas F. Torrance. Reality and Scientific Theology, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock (1985) and Theological and Natural Science, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock (2002).

⁸ Tenzin Gyatso. "Science at the Crossroads;" His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet; <http://www.dalailama.com/messages/buddhism/science-at-the-crossroads> (accessed January 1, 2017).

⁹ Siderits is similar, taking Buddhism as a non-dogmatic set of beliefs and practices based on reason rather than authority; Mark Siderits. Buddhism as Philosophy, Indianapolis: Hackett (2007).

¹⁰ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. The Hindu View of Life, London: George Allen & Unwin (1926), p. 15.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 16.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ John Dewey. A Common Faith, New Haven: Yale University Press (1934).

¹⁸ James. The Will to Believe and Other Essays, New York: Dover (1956), p. 17.

¹⁹ Allama Iqbal. The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, Lecture I.

²⁰ Robert Larmer reaches the same conclusion about miracles in Larmer. The Legitimacy of Miracle, Lanham: Lexington Books (2014).

²¹ Eliezer Berkovits. "What Is Jewish Philosophy?" Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought 3.2 (Spring 1961), 117-30.

²² *ibid.*, p. 119.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 120.

²⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 120-1.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 120.

²⁶ Eliezer Berkovits. God, Man, and History. Jerusalem: The Eliezer Berkovits Institute for Jewish Thought at the Shalom Center (1959; new edition 2004), p. 15.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 17.

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ For example, Johnson. Biblical Knowing and Epistemology and Biblical Theology as well as Knowledge by Ritual: A Biblical Prolegomenon to Sacramental Theology, Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplement 13, Warsaw, IN: Eisenbrauns (2016); and Scripture's Knowing: A Companion to Biblical Epistemology, Eugene, OR: Cascade (2016).

³² Torrance. Reality and Scientific Theology and Theological and Natural Science, among other books.

³³ faith, MerriamWebster.com; <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/faith> (accessed April 6, 2016).

³⁴ Daniel Howard-Snyder, Frances Howard-Snyder, and Ryan Wasserman. The Power of Logic; 5th ed., New York: McGraw-Hill (2012), pp. 509-12.

³⁵ Thomas Kuhn. The Structure of Scientific Revolutions; 4th ed., Chicago: University of Chicago (2012; 1st ed. 1962).

³⁶ For example, Thomas Aquinas' Summa Theologica is one of the most impressive works of systematic reasoning ever written.

³⁷ Augustine. On the Profit of Believing and Confessions, Book VI, chapter 5.

³⁸ C. S. Lewis. Mere Christianity, New York: HarperCollins (1952; new ed. 2001), p. 163.

³⁹ Radhakrishnan is wrong that Christianity relies on only one religious experience, "the immediate certitude of Jesus as one whose authority over conscience is self-certifying and whose ability and willingness to save the soul it is impossible not to trust." The Hindu View of Life, p. 19. The Resurrection is a more important religious experience, but, as Lewis shows, we cannot name *only* one.

⁴⁰ On which, see the likes of Richard Baukham. Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospel as Eyewitness Testimony, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (2006); N. T. Wright. The Resurrection of the Son of God, Minneapolis: Fortress Press (2003); and William Lane Craig. Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus, Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellin Press (1989).

⁴¹ On this discussion see Kuhn's challenge to the unmixed objectivity of science as well as Karl Popper's analysis of falsification in The Logic of Scientific Discovery, London: Routledge (1992). Also useful is A. J. Ayer's Language, Truth, and Logic, a classical statement of Logical Positivism and a good source on the idea that scientific statements are characterized by verifiability.

⁴² Kuhn, p. 145.

⁴³ James. Will to Believe, pp. 27-8.

⁴⁴ Lewis, p. 164.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 164-5.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 165.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ See, for example, Book XII of Augustine's Confessions where he commits himself to the authority of the Bible's meaning as intended by its authors. Note, however, that Augustine is open to a biblical passage meaning more than that intended by its author.

⁵⁰ The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy; The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, Chicago (1978).

⁵¹ To be a bit more precise, it seems to me that a falsification of biblical inerrancy would require that the multiplied probability of these two propositions exceed the probability of biblical inerrancy given whatever evidence supports it.

⁵² There are other possible tests for falsification, such as whether there is any very good historical evidence that the New Testament's depiction of Jesus' character is seriously inaccurate.

⁵³ Arguably neither can some theories in science, such as ideas in theoretical physics testable only by consistency with observations. I myself am inclined to consider the taking of those observations as itself a process of repeatable and controlled experimentation. Resolving this matter, however, is outside the scope of this paper.

⁵⁴ dogma. MerriamWebster.com; <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dogma> (accessed March 10, 2018).

⁵⁵ dogma. Dictionary.com; <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/dogma> (accessed March 10, 2018).

⁵⁶ dogma, MerriamWebster.com.

⁵⁷ David Hume. An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, Sections IV-V.

⁵⁸ Thomas Reid. An Inquiry into the Human Mind.

⁵⁹ Alvin Plantinga. Warranted Christian Belief, New York: Oxford University Press (1993).

⁶⁰ Susan Haack. "Double-Aspect Foundherentism: A New Theory of Empirical Justification;" Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 53.1 (March 1993), 113-28 and "Précis of 'Evidence and Inquiry: Towards Reconstruction in Epistemology';" Synthese 112.1 (July 1997), 7-11.

⁶¹ John Zeis. "A Foundherentist Conception of the Justification of Religious Belief;" International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 58 (2005), 133-60.

⁶² Mark J. Boone. "Inferential, Coherential, and Foundational Warrant: An Eclectic Account of the Sources of Warrant;" Logos & Episteme 5.4 (2014), 377-98.