

On the Very Idea of Theological Knowledge: A Comparison of Theology and Science

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It is an honor and a pleasure to return to Beijing for yet a third time. Once again we are all in debt to the symposium organizers, Mel Stewart, William Hasker, Zhao Dunhua and Liu Zongkun. The hospitality of the Departments of Religious Studies and Philosophy at Peking University has been most kind.

I was privileged to speak twice before at Peking University on topics relating religion and science. This present essay continues that series, but with a particular focus. In "Religion and Science in Christian Perspective" I argued that natural science cannot replace theology.^[1] On the contrary, science and technology need the values of religious wisdom in our time more than ever! My second paper rejected the Western, Enlightenment goal of "neutrality" and "value-free" inquiry in religious studies and in science. Against the myth of neutrality, I urged that religious wisdom can provide virtues and guidance which help us in the quest to know about this world (science) and to know about the Supreme Ultimate reality

^[1] Published in English in Mel Stewart and Zang Zhigang, eds., The Symposium of Chinese-American Philosophy and Religious Studies (San Francisco: International Scholars Pub., 1998), 63-74.

(theology).^{2[2]} In the present essay, I consider further the nature and character of theological knowledge, compared to scientific knowledge. Against the philosophers who would question the very idea of theological knowledge, especially Lao Tzu, Heidegger and Wittgenstein, I argue that such knowledge is possible for human beings in this world.

My favorite classical Chinese text is the Tao Te Ching. The famous beginning of this beautiful work is this:

The Tao which can be uttered (tao-ed) is not the eternal Tao;
The name which can be named is not the eternal Name;
The Nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth.

Here we find Lao Tzu denying even the possibility of what I am going to call "theological knowledge." We simply cannot know true propositions about Ultimate Reality (the Tao). The Tao transcends any and all attempts to express itself in propositions. For the purposes of this present paper, let us agree to use the term "Tao" to stand for Ultimate Reality as various religions understand it (God, Nothingness, Brahman, etc.) This is the same Reality that Zhao Dunhua calls "the religious Gegenstand" in his contribution to our Symposium.^{3[3]}

What counts, then, as knowledge of the Tao? What then is theological knowledge? It is first of all not knowledge about a religion. Knowledge about religions is certainly possible, for religion is a human institution with history, texts and artifacts. No one should deny that we can have knowledge about religion – otherwise the Department of Religious Studies at Peking University would be out a job! What I mean by theological knowledge is knowledge of the Ultimate Reality (Tao) which religious faith is about. Theology, as I use the term, is the conceptual, abstract dimension of a religious tradition. In this sense there is Muslim, Hindu, Christian and even Taoist "theology." In Western religious terms, theological

^{2[2]} "Ethical Values through Religious Studies," published in Chinese in Mel Stewart and Zang Zhigang, eds., East and West: Religious Ethics and Other Essays (Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press, 1997).

^{3[3]} Symposium papers are forthcoming in Chinese from Peking University Press, ed. Mel Stewart and Zhao Dunhua.

knowledge is knowledge about God, and not about religion, human religious experience, nor religious faith. Theological knowledge may come through a religious tradition, religious experience, or religious faith, but these items are not what theological knowledge is about. Theology, after all, is the study of God or the Tao. Theology therefore should not be confused with religious studies, even though it often is. Religious studies is the study of religion; theology is the study of the Tao.

In his recent, excellent volume on Religion and Revelation, Prof. Keith Ward of Oxford University sets forth a program of “comparative theology” which is not part of any religious tradition.^{4[4]} Ward wants to study God from the perspective of any and all religious traditions, scriptures and experiences. While this is certainly a valuable project, I would myself call his inquiry “philosophy of religion” rather than theology. I would like to reserve the term “theology” for a study advanced from within a particular religious worldview.

What, then, is theological knowledge? Ward wants to move us away from the older concept of theological knowledge as doctrine, that is, as assured propositional knowledge. “The propositions of theology are concerned to articulate and express, always provisionally and indirectly, such disclosures and forms of commitment [within a religion], rather than to define a set of truths which are directly and precisely descriptive of suprasensory reality” (29f.) Ward rightly insists that the communal and traditioned project of knowing God is best understood as modest, provisional, dialectical and open to revision. Even conceived in such modest terms, however, is theology possible? Can we have conceptual, propositional knowledge of the Tao? My thesis in this essay is yes, theological knowledge is possible. After a brief examination of some objections to theology, I will compare theological to scientific knowledge in order to better understand the differences between natural science and theology. I then set forth six criteria for theological knowledge in a pluralistic community of inquiry.

"One who speaks does not know; one who knows does not speak." Thus speaks Lao Tzu (Tao Te Ching, chapter 56, line 128). Like the Old Teacher (lao tzu) I must risk speaking about the Great Ultimate

^{4[4]} Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1994. This is the first book in a multi-volumed work in comparative theology.

(Tao, the religious Gegenstand), thus showing myself to be one who does not know! But then theology is always paradoxical. I have no quarrel with those who think that theological knowledge is paradoxical, difficult, or can never arrive at the full truth. My complaint is against those who argue that theology per se is impossible, or who misrepresent the object of theological study.

The two most important Western philosophers of our century are Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Both were very interested in religion, and passed through periods of genuine Christian faith. Both respected religion, religious faith and the religious way of life. But alas for my project here, both were dead set against theological knowledge! I can only briefly respond here to their criticisms of the theological enterprise.

Heidegger began his academic studies in theology, and tells us that theological studies brought him to an interest in hermeneutics and phenomenology.^{5[5]} He published two essays on the relationship between theology and philosophy, which have become famous.^{6[6]} In this book, Heidegger correctly sees that theology is a "positive science," that is, an area of knowledge with an object of study. So far we are in agreement. But Heidegger wrongly attributes to theology the study of faith (that is, "die Christlichkeit" or Christian-ness) rather than the study of God. Heidegger claims that the "given" or basic data of theological science is Christian faith and practise. "Thus we maintain that what is given for theology (its positum) is Christianness. . . What does 'Christianness' mean? We call faith Christian. The essence of faith can formally be sketched as a mode of human existence. . ." (9). Christianness, then, is the life of faith. And this faith is the basis of theology as a positive science.

Heidegger is mistaken in his grasp of the purpose of theology as a positive science. I do believe that theology is a positive science, but with a different purpose. The purpose of theology is to understand

^{5[5]} This is disclosed in a dialogue Heidegger had with a Japanese philosopher, published in On the Way to Language, tr. P. D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 9-10.

^{6[6]} These are collected in his book, Phänomenologie und Theologie (Frankfurt a/M: Klostermann, 1970), and published in English in The Piety of Thinking, tr. J. G. Hart and J. C. Maraldo (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Pr., 1976). My references are to the English translation.

the Tao. In this quest, of course, theology can and should make sense of the way of life within a particular religion. But this is not the only, nor the chief, purpose of theology. Rather, theology is the science of God, or the Tao. In making this mistake, of course, Heidegger is in good company! The problem with this common view is, in the end it collapses theology into religious studies (a collapse I am trying to avoid). This is so even when Heidegger allows that theology must also study “that which is revealed in faith” (9). For such a study can also be merely descriptive (for example, “Christians believe that God is so-and-so”). This is clear when, in another essay, Heidegger states: “Above all else one must determine what theology, as a mode of thinking and speaking, is to place in discussion. That is the Christian faith, and what is believed therein.” (22). On the contrary, if theology is a discipline at all (a “positive science”) it must have the Tao as its object of study. What theology “places into discussion” is God, therefore, and not “faith.”

The other great philosopher of our century, Ludwig Wittgenstein, had very different problems with theological knowledge. He believed that a religious way of life was a noble one, and should be pursued with the utmost seriousness. His questions had to do with the validity of religious language. Religious language is legitimate, for Wittgenstein, when this “language game” is grounded in a genuine religious form of life. Both Wittgenstein and Heidegger, then, see theology as grounded in the way of life of a particular religion. And this is a valid insight. “Practise gives [theological] words their sense” Wittgenstein tells us in some illuminating passages from Culture and Value.^{7[7]} What is key to a right understanding of religious language, then, is the way of life – and of suffering – that it flows from. Wittgenstein rejected any notion of theology that would make it like an explanation of something, or like a scientific hypothesis.

There is clearly something right here in Wittgenstein’s remarks. People do not often come to religious faith because of some academic exercise proving the existence of God. Religious faith does not normally come about because of data, evidence and argument of a scientific or empirical sort. Religious belief is not a scientific hypothesis. I also agree with the explicit insight of Wittgenstein, that we must take

^{7[7]} Ed. G. H. von Wright with Heikki Nyman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 85.

particular care to examine the form of life which gives religious language its sense. But against Wittgenstein and his followers, on the other hand, religious beliefs and thoughts — once entered into — can and do provide some blocks for building an explanation. For example, the doctrine of karma can be used to explain things. Why are certain people born into great suffering and others into relative ease and comfort? Karma is one answer. To pretend otherwise, as Wittgenstein and his followers do, is to distort religious language. The total separation of religious belief from explanation and propositional knowledge is a confusion, and a misrepresentation of religious belief. Of course, the meaning of some religious language just is the way of life it engenders. But to absolutize this — to insist that this is true of all religious language and belief — is a blunder in the philosophy of religion.

The most natural and faithful understanding of religious faith (at least in the religions I have studied) is to allow that religion does have an explanatory dimension to it. You can explain things in the world using theological doctrines. Such explanations are put forward in all of the world religions I am aware of, within the history of their own theological developments. But Wittgenstein is surely right to distinguish such "explanations" from natural science.

Finally, if we return to the Tao Te Ching, critics in East and West have insisted that theological knowledge is not possible because of the Mystery of the Tao. God cannot be grasped in human words, both Lao Tzu and Dionysius the Areopagite (Greek theologian, ca. 500 AD) would agree.^{8[8]} I agree also, with the main point. The Tao cannot be fully grasped in language. Words are a poor instrument, but the only one we have. While the meaning of ordinary words comes from ordinary life, language can be stretched to describe extraordinary things. A good example of this is the language of modern physics.

In contemporary physics, the matter and energy of the physical universe are understood to be made up of very small, sub-atomic particles. Light, for example, is made up of photons, and electricity of electrons. While scientists call these things "particles" they are not like particles we know in the normal world of our human environment. These particles behave like waves of energy, too. But a particle and a wave are very different things in our normal, everyday world! The strange and fascinating sub-atomic

^{8[8]} See Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works, tr. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Pr., 1988).

world of quantum mechanics demands a stretching and bending of our ordinary words and concepts, in order to describe it. The same thing is true in theology. The Tao is so far beyond our ordinary world, that everyday terms and concepts must be stretched beyond their literal use. But surely we can refer to the Tao with metaphor and figurative language, even when our descriptions of the Tao will always be less than fully adequate. The Tao Te Ching, after all, is filled with just such metaphoric and poetic descriptions of the Tao. While a naïve realism for religious language must be rejected, at the same time we can assume that metaphor, simile, figure (and sometime even literal language) can and do refer to the Tao.^{9[9]}

Grounds for Theological Knowledge

I have argued against some philosophers, that we can have knowledge of God or the Tao, the subject and object of religious faith. If this is so, the next question is: under what circumstances can religious language qualify as knowledge? There are three areas or “grounds” within which the believer can make a claim to knowledge. My interest at this point is not focused upon whether the believer does know something in any sense of the word “know,” but rather upon the claim to know something made in a community of inquiry.

My own epistemology has been influenced by philosophers of science, especially C. S. Peirce, Michael Polanyi, and Imre Lakatos (as well as Wittgenstein). For some years now, I have been involved in the dialogue between religion and science. In the community of scholars interested in this topic, upon what grounds can a theologian claim to know something about the Tao? Both theology and science, in my view, are rational disciplines, what Heidegger called “positive science.” A reasoned and disciplined inquiry into knowledge takes place within a community of inquiry (Peirce, Polanyi), and within a tradition of scientific

^{9[9]} See the studies by Ian T. Ramsey, Models and Mystery (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1963), Ian G. Barbour, Myths, Models and Paradigms (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), Richard Swinburne, The Coherence of Theism (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1977), and Janet M. Soskice, Metaphor and Religious Language (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1985).

research or “research program” (Lakatos).^{10[10]} The meaning of a word is its use in a particular way of life, and in a given “language game” (Wittgenstein).^{11[11]} Within a reasoned, disciplined inquiry into knowledge, the claim to know something means that we have reasons or grounds to back-up our claim. These grounds or reasons are ones which are taught and accepted within a particular tradition of inquiry.^{12[12]} Of course, in everyday life it would be absurd to insist on these same standards. For example, if I say that every American participant in this conference had toast and coffee for breakfast at the hotel, in an ordinary conversation a demand for evidence to back up this claim would be both rude and absurd. Even if, in the give and take of conversation, some reason for doubting this claim were to come up, my appeal to direct observation and memory would be sufficient to ground my claim to know. As many contemporary philosophers of religion insist, not all of our beliefs need to be grounded in evidence, in order for our belief to be “properly basic.”^{13[13]}

However, I wish here to pursue the question of knowledge beyond what is merely “properly basic” for a given individual. In a cross-cultural and pluralistic inquiry into the truth about religion, that is, within a disciplined and comparative philosophy of religion, on what grounds can and should a theologian or philosopher claim to know something about the Tao? Especially within the current dialogue between

^{10[10]} See C. S. Peirce, “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities” and “Truth” in Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, vol. 5, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Pr., 1965), especially paragraphs 311, 565-570; Michael Polanyi, Personal Knowledge (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1962); and Imre Lakatos, The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1980).

^{11[11]} Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), paragraphs 7-21.

^{12[12]} See Jürgen Habermas, Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action, tr. C. Lenhardt and S. W. Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Pr., 1990), 136-137 and throughout.

^{13[13]} The reference here is to Alvin Plantinga, in particular. See the essay by Kelly James Clark in this volume, for an introduction in Chinese. See further Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” in Faith and Rationality, ed. A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Pr., 1983).

religion and science, what claims are implicitly made when a philosopher or theologian says they know something about the Tao? As a way of beginning to answer this question, let us compare and contrast theology and natural science.

With respect to their similarities, both scientific and theological knowledge make sense within (and come out of) a tradition of inquiry. Both are expressed in human languages which are always understood to be less than adequate as tools for describing reality. Both mean to refer to reality, and should be interested in the truth for its own sake. Both contain theories, and are interested in the evidence and arguments for and against such theories (especially rival theories).

However, the differences between scientific and theological knowledge are as important as the similarities! Theology comes out of a religious tradition, and is based on faith. Natural science comes from scientific traditions of inquiry, and is based upon pre-suppositions (which can only loosely be called "faith"). Natural science arises from experimental evidence and observational data, although its theories often go beyond what can be proven strictly from evidence. The scientific attitude is nevertheless to believe only so far as reason and evidence allow. Theological knowledge goes beyond what can be well confirmed through reason and public evidence, and seeks only to be supported by common reason and public evidence (not based upon it). Finally, the subject of study in natural science is physical reality, but the subject of study in theology is the Tao.

Since theology is based upon faith and goes beyond what is available through public evidence, when can we call such belief "knowledge"? What criteria can there be for a religious belief or doctrine to qualify as knowledge within the debate between religion and science? The context for a claim to knowledge I have in mind is what Ward calls "comparative theology," that is, international and intercultural philosophy of religion. This is the kind of community of inquiry represented by the Peking Symposia, for example. The same sort of criteria will also work for the contemporary religion and science dialogue. Let us examine, then, two ways in which theologians have grounded their claims to know: revelation and love.

Revelation. One quite good source for the knowledge of the Tao is direct revelation, mystical insight, or immediate enlightenment. Karl Barth, the most important Christian theologian of the 20th

century, insisted on this point. Theology is grounded upon revelation from God through Jesus Christ, and on nothing else. “According to Holy Scriptures God’s revelation is a ground which has no higher or deeper ground above or below it but is an absolute ground in itself, and therefore for us a court from which there can be no possible appeal to a higher court. Its reality and truth do not rest on a superior reality and truth.”^{14[14]} For a church theologian writing a Church Dogmatics, I believe this assertion is fully warranted. Within a particular tradition, any claim to knowledge can and must be based upon the religious insights and traditioned reasoning which that community of faith has developed over the years, centuries or millennia. For Christians, this just is Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word of God, the Holy Bible (as the Book of Christ), and the classical, orthodox consensus found in creeds, commentaries and other texts. If there is a true revelation from the Tao, then there is knowledge of the Tao. This much is clear. But that is a big “if” at the start of the sentence!

Keith Ward points to the fact that many religions claim revelation or special enlightenment. “It is useless to say that God makes his revelation self-authenticating; for Muslims and Jews say that as well as Christians, and they cannot all be right, since their alleged revelations disagree” (7). While such facts do undermine any direct claim to revelation, Ward goes too far in claiming that self-authentication is “useless.” It can be quite useful and appropriate in certain contexts. Even in the dialogue between religion and science, or between various religions and philosophies, it can serve a useful purpose. True and full knowledge of Christ, or Allah, or the Buddha is based upon religious experience, sacred writings or wisdom, and religious practise. To know these things it is necessary to experience them oneself, and such experiences are “self-authenticating.”

Even when we grant this point, however, we have not arrived at a sufficient criterion for knowledge claims about the Tao within a pluralistic, academic community of inquiry. Given the importance of revelation, however, the following criteria are necessary (but not sufficient) for a doctrine to count as “knowledge” within a broader academic community:

1. the doctrine arises out of a religious tradition and community;
2. there is sufficient warrant within the religious tradition for this doctrine, given what counts as wisdom, insight, revelation and/or religious truth for that community.

^{14[14]} Church Dogmatics, vol, I part 1 (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1975), 305.

Reasons of the Heart. Within the Christian religion, there is a long and illustrious tradition of epistemology based upon having the proper virtues of the soul or mind. In order to know God, it is necessary to have faith in God and to come to love God. Without honesty, humility, and love, any hope for a knowledge of God is impossible. This viewpoint is in fact the human side of the previous insistence that God is only known in God's own self-revelation. This tradition in religious epistemology goes back to the Christian Bible. For example, the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians:

Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification . . . And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom, but by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to spiritual people. . . . But I, brother and sisters, could not address you as spiritual people, but only as people of the "flesh" (1 Corinthians 2:6, 13 and 3:1).

For Paul, the "flesh" here is a moral category, as the context of his letter makes clear. Because of the strife, envy, hatred and division among the Corinthians he was not able to impart any deeper wisdom, any fuller revelation of God. Spiritual truths can only be revealed to spiritual people. Within the development of Christian theology, Augustine, Aquinas, Pascal among many others have likewise insisted that true knowledge of God is based upon a right relationship with God, especially faith and love.

What are the implications of this for our problem? First of all, if Paul, Pascal, Augustine and Aquinas are right (and I think they are),^{15[15]} then the quest for knowledge of God is not merely an empirical, logical and scientific quest. The quest for knowledge of the Tao is just as much a spiritual and moral quest. This has implications for comparative philosophy of religion, and the religion-science dialogue.

If the quest for knowledge of the Tao always takes place within a community of inquiry, given certain traditioned and communal norms and virtues, there is still no reason in principle why an

^{15[15]} See my essay, "Ethical Values through Religious Studies," and the essay by William Wainwright, "Reason, Passion and Proper Function", both in Chinese, in Stewart and Zhang, East and West, op. cit. In English, see William Wainwright, Reason and the Heart (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Pr., 1995); Linda Zagaebski, Virtues of the Mind (New York: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1996) and W. Jay Wood, Epistemology (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Pr., 1998).

academic community might not agree on basic virtues and goals in the quest for religious knowledge.

There is no reason in principle why some values and affections might not be accepted by that community in its quest for knowledge. In terms of the religion-science dialogue, for example, the scientific community has developed several intellectual virtues that can and should be part of any quest for religious knowledge, too. John Templeton and the Templeton Foundation, for example, are dedicated to bringing the intellectual virtues of natural science into the theological domain, under the rubric of “humility theology.”^{16[16]} Some of these virtues include intellectual humility, a quest for truth, honesty and openness to the evidence. These virtues and goals should, in principle, be acceptable to any serious academic community.

We could also include the concept of a “rationality of communication” which seeks understanding, as opposed to a rationality of success which seeks victory in argument. Jürgen Habermas, one of the most important philosophers writing in German today, has used the idea of a rationality of communication as a basis for developing an ethics of communication.^{17[17]} A rationality of communication seeks to understand one’s colleagues, and to be understood by them. Open and free dialogue is key to communicative action, according to Habermas, rather than manipulation or coercion. Again, these are values which, in principle, should be acceptable to any community of inquiry.

In my own modest essay on “Ethical Values through Religious Studies” I discovered in both the Christian and Confucian tradition some intellectual virtues and values which I believe can and should guide any comparative philosophy of religion, as well as the dialogue between religion and science.^{18[18]} Besides the values and virtues already mentioned in the previous paragraphs, a key principle is the desire for knowledge to be in service to love and justice, that is, to human flourishing. Knowledge sought only for its own sake may be destructive, as the legend of Dr. Faust makes clear.

Even if, however, these values and virtues become accepted within a particular community of inquiry into the truth about the Tao, there is one virtue which cannot be settled upon: faith. Faith is traditionally understood to be required in the quest to know and love God. For example, the New

^{16[16]} See, for example, the book The Humble Approach.(1981; rev. ed., New York: Continuum, 1995).

^{17[17]} See his central work on this topic, A Theory of Communicative Action, 2 vols. (Boston: Beacon Pr., 1984-1987).

^{18[18]} Art. cit., note 2.

Testament teaches that “without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists, and that he rewards those who seek him” (Hebrews 11:6). However, if a community of inquiry is inter-religious, how can we demand any particular religious faith for its members? Such a demand would exclude anyone who did not share the same religion, and this would undercut the very purpose of the dialogue. There is a possible solution here, which is to seek to be open to belief in whatever truths and experiences concerning the Tao manifest themselves. If members of our community of inquiry are open to belief, and interested in learning from our own faith and its tradition, this is surely all we can ask to begin with. In fact, this would be an improvement upon the manner in which too many professors of philosophy or religion approach faith, namely, as skeptics. A skeptical attitude will not advance the quest for truth about religion, and should be abandoned. Reflecting on the role of faith and virtue leads us to some further necessary criteria for knowledge in comparative philosophy of religion:

3. it is a sincerely held belief or doctrine, part of a theology which profoundly shapes the believer's life.
4. the doctrine is in consonance with human flourishing, and with good moral values and virtues.

The affective, moral and spiritual dimensions of the quest for truth about the Tao demand at least this much, I believe. The word “consonance” is simply meant to indicate a vague agreement, and has no strict logical meaning (it includes non-contradiction, of course, but suggests more than that).

Reason, Evidence and Argument. While we can and should abandon a skeptical attitude toward religion and toward faith, a scientific attitude is welcome (and these should not be confused). Any academic quest for truth can and should respect whatever evidence, reason and good argument can provide. But as Richard Swinburne has noted in his book, Faith and Reason, there are no universally agreed upon standards of logic.^{19[19]} Alisdair MacIntyre makes this same point at length in his excellent and influential work, Whose Justice?, Which Rationality?.^{20[20]} What counts as reason, data, and “good” argument are contested judgements, not matters of universal reason. While this fact is widely accepted, a particularly important point is often overlooked. The debate about what counts as rational is distinct from, and need not be bound up with, the debate about religious truths. In the actual, messy affair of human history, of course,

^{19[19]} Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1981, 33-45.

^{20[20]} Univ. of Notre Dame Pr., 1988

these two issues often come together. Take for example the reception of Aristotle into Jewish, Islamic and Christian theology in the Middle Ages. Here the heated debates between various sides included topics that were at bottom theological (such as the nature of God), and also ones that were properly logical (such as the status of universals). It is certainly true that within the histories of religion and philosophy, theological and logical debates have been closely intertwined. My point is that this close connection is not necessary.

It is possible to establish, independent of any religious disputes, agreed upon standards of rationality in comparative philosophy of religion. This same possibility is open in the dialogue with religion and science. One main thesis of MacIntyre's work is that our view of what is rational is part of a tradition of inquiry which also includes a theory of the ultimate Good. I believe that MacIntyre presses this point too far. We can (again in principle) agree on proximate goods for human flourishing. It is true that these proximate goods will be informed by varying conceptions of the ultimate Good, which can find no agreed consensus. The agreement will also exclude many proximate goods which cannot be agreed upon, even ones which particular religions or worldviews may find extremely important. On the basis of agreed upon proximate goods, we can then agree upon certain values and moral principles which can then inform criteria for rationality. This, I believe, has been demonstrated by Habermas. On the other hand, we must reject the claim of Keith Ward, that these universal principles of reason already exist. "There are some very basic rational criteria which can be brought to bear upon all claims to truth, in religion as elsewhere" (319). This is simply not the case, as Swinburne and MacIntyre alike point out. There are no universal criteria for rationality. But based upon certain agreed upon proximate goods, and upon a universal but vague "common sense" (which I believe Ward is pointing to), it should be possible to develop agreed upon criteria for rationality independent of any religious commitments. This is a point which must be pressed against MacIntyre, at least in comparative philosophy of religion and the religion-science dialogue (I yield to MacIntyre in the area of moral philosophy).

Consideration of a scientific attitude in the quest for truth about the Tao, therefore, lead us to some final criteria for religious knowledge:

5. given our best standards of reasonableness, and all available relevant evidence, the doctrine is at least as reasonable as rival interpretations, explanations or theories put forth by other religions and philosophies.

6. the doctrine is true (or at least not falsified by all available relevant evidence).

Not many religious doctrines will satisfy all six of these criteria. The Christian doctrine that God is a Trinity, for example, does not, since it does not satisfy criterion 5. Remember, the “we” in criterion 5 refers to a pluralistic, academic community: not the Church. It will also come to pass that contradictory doctrines from different religions may both satisfy all these criteria. One such doctrinal debate would be the question of whether the Tao is personal, or transcends the categories of personal and impersonal. In such cases, only one (or perhaps none!) of these doctrines will in the end be "knowledge" (see criterion 6). We want our doctrines to be true, to count as knowledge. But it is not possible to know in advance what the truth is, in science or religion. We must settle for not falsified, and well supported, by all available evidence. Resolving such doctrinal debates may have to await judgement of the future. For now, within our time and place, within a specific academic community, the theologian can be justified in saying that she knows things about the Tao, and not simply that she believes them. In any case, the very idea of theological knowledge should no longer be denied.
