

Epistemology for the Rest of Us

Hints of a Paradigm Shift in *Abraham's Crossing the Threshold*

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I would like to invite you to a tiny little mission church in north Philadelphia. It is the site of one of my most treasured memories of ministry, but also an event that constantly challenges my inherited paradigms in philosophy of religion.

It is an early winter evening, so darkness presses against the windows of the rented sanctuary as a small group of believers are gathering; light and song push back against that darkness and oozes out of the cracks of the aging, tiny structure. We have gathered for an evening service of celebration as several members of a neighborhood family, new to the church, have presented themselves for baptism. Over the past several months we have witnessed a transformation in the mother and some of her children and tonight they make public profession of their newfound faith by dying and rising in the waters of baptism. The father and some uncles have come for the service to honor those being baptized, but as with previous visits to Sunday worship, they remain aloof, distant, and unengaged. But tonight that will change.

Baptism in a Pentecostal church brings together the charismatic and the sacramental: their baptism is situated in a narrative enacted through song and sermon, echoed in the story of their testimonies as they present themselves for baptism. And as they are baptized, Pastor Billings draws upon the materiality and physicality of the sacrament as a picture of the Gospel itself. Tonight it's not just a matter of *telling*, but a matter of *showing*. As the mother emerges from the water it feels as if we are witnessing the resurrection itself. Pastor and parishioner embrace in tears as the congregation can no longer contain its "Hallelujahs!" and shouts of praise; their songs and prayers be-

ABSTRACT: William Abraham's "canonical theism" calls into question standard strategies in philosophy of religion which (1) strain out the particularities of Christian faith, distilling a "mere theism" and (2) position Christian faith within a broader, "general" epistemology. I evaluate Abraham's call for a philosophical approach that honors the thick particularity of Christian faith and makes room for the unique epistemological status of revelation. I conclude that Abraham's promising project could be extended to more radically call into question the "intellectualism" that characterizes contemporary philosophy of religion.

come the sound track of resurrection. He is risen! *She* is risen! As the teenagers are baptized, they each renounce the Evil One and pledge allegiance to the coming King. They have a new story, a new love, a new desire.

And then we notice that slowly the father has made his way to the front of the sanctuary. He has been gripped by something in what he has witnessed. As others notice, a hush comes over the congregation. His brothers with him, we see the father quietly but urgently speaking with the pastor, and then a laugh of surprise and joy breaks across the pastor's face as he embraces the father and assures him, "Of course!" The men have come asking: "Can we be baptized, too? Can we become Christians?" The waters of baptism stir once again and the sound track of resurrection becomes even louder as an entire family is enfolded into the family of God.

Just what happened there? More to the point, to what extent can the regnant paradigms in philosophy of religion *think* or make sense of a scene like this one? This father's desire to embrace the Christian story—and be embraced by Christ—was not an instance of intellectual resolution. Christ was not the "answer" to a "question." Jorge was not drawn to "theism," and when he, too, emerged from the waters of baptism he did not rise with a new "perspective" or "worldview." He didn't die to skepticism and rise to "knowledge" (cf. Rom. 6:1–14). Something other, something different, something both ordinary and extraordinary was witnessed there. Are the dominant frameworks in philosophy of religion able to do justice to what happened there in that tiny sanctuary on a winter night? Or are they plagued by a kind of reductionism and rationalism that is poorly calibrated to understand a scenario like this one? What picture of the "believer" is assumed in our philosophies of religion?

Against Minimalist Theism: Epistemological Primacy in Philosophy of Religion

I am excited and intrigued by the work of William Abraham, and *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation* in particular, because I believe that he provides hints of a paradigm shift that can do justice to the religious experience of "ordinary believers." In a spirit of charitable critique, humble boldness, and no-holds-barred irenics, he manages to call out almost every existing school in contemporary philosophy of religion for uncritically buying into various versions of the "standard strategy" that obfuscates the nature of faith precisely by canonizing some epistemological theory. Granted, Abraham's charm might fool us into missing the fact that he is calling us to the mat for pawning the family jewels to the highest epistemological bidder. The "standard strategy," as Abraham describes it, is a widespread project that seeks to "secure the rationality of theism" by first articulating a "general"

epistemology which then provides a foothold for demonstrating the rationality of theistic belief. The general epistemology provides “a foothold outside of theology” which functions as an anchor to which theistic belief can be tethered (6).¹ This standard strategy is characteristic of a wide range of particular epistemological theories; it is a big tent under which one will find an eclectic collection, from classic natural theologians and “Wittgensteinian fideists” to Schubert Ogden and Reformed epistemologists (a lot of folks who would be surprised to find themselves on the same team, as it were).

I cannot here adjudicate Abraham’s claims regarding who is and is not a practitioner of the standard strategy. I am more interested in his insightful critique of two significant problems that are often outcomes of this strategy. The first he describes as “methodism” (surely a playful suggestion to make from the halls of SMU). The standard strategy opts for a kind of one-size-fits-all epistemology that establishes general criteria for knowledge—and often the bar is set very (perhaps even impossibly) high.² As a result, all sorts of beliefs that do not meet these criteria or cannot make it over the bar are denigrated as mere opinion, “faith,” and thus subject to doubt. What is going on here is a sort of vanilla-izing of epistemology: the map of knowledge is flat and monolithic. It shows no signs of attention to texture, depth, or gradations in the epistemic terrain. In contrast to the methodist, the “particularist” comes to questions of knowledge with a more fine-grained map of the epistemic terrain. She rejects the monolithic (and hegemonic) assumptions of the methodist’s one-size-fits-all epistemology and instead embraces an Aristotelian (29n10) principle of “appropriate epistemic fit,” which means that she is primed to “look for relevant differences in the way we adjudicate different kinds of claims” (45). The particularist is an epistemic pluralist and expects to find different habits of belief and justification when we are dealing with different subject matter and objects of belief. Whereas the methodist is an “epistemic miser” (34) who countenances only a small range of legitimate modes of belief, the particularist is epistemically generous and is not surprised by different epistemological habits when it comes to different subjects of knowledge.

Because philosophy of religion is dominated by methodists (the preponderance of Reformed epistemologists notwithstanding!), contemporary paradigms in philosophy of religion are prone to impose on religious belief epistemic criteria which are inappropriate to the subject at hand. Animated

1. William J. Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 44. (Subsequent parenthetical references are to this text.) One might wonder whether there is a certain return of a standard strategy in Abraham’s account of divine revelation, which begins by first placing it in “the conceptual field of revelation” *per se* (60) or from what we know about “personal human agents that we know” (65). However, I will not pursue this here.

2. This is why methodism breeds skepticism (33). I think Abraham’s critique of skepticism applies well to certain schools in “postmodern” philosophy of religion (39n24, though I think he misunderstands radical orthodoxy on this point).

by the standard strategy, methodists in philosophy of religion adopt a generic epistemology and then require “believers” to exhibit those modes of believing and knowing. And it is just this generic methodism that leads philosophers of religion to ignore or even rule out of court *particular* Christian claims to knowledge such as “revelation.” Thus Abraham’s bold project of making the particularity and specificity of divine revelation central to Christian epistemology is an outcome of his desire to abide by the particularist principle of appropriate epistemic fit—a principle spurned by methodists.

There is a second important outcome of the standard strategy in philosophy of religion: What emerges on the other side of the project is a very “thin” version of religious belief, a “minimalist version of theism” (10) in which “crucial theological claims are systematically ignored or set aside because they would not fit the schema in hand” (9). Abraham aptly describes this as “the mere theism that normally detains the philosopher of religion” (95): “rarely, if at all, do these proposals secure the deep content of Christian belief” (9). Furthermore, the “mere theism” of contemporary philosophy of religion, while failing to do justice to the “thickness” and particularity of Christian belief, also fails to do justice to “the way in which a host of Christian believers actually believe” (10, emphasis added). Here Abraham names a problem that has concerned me for some time. Just what sort of animal is pictured when contemporary philosophy of religion talks about “believers”? Do the believers countenanced in contemporary philosophy of religion ever kneel or sing? Do they ever pray the Rosary? Do they ever respond to an altar call, weeping on their knees? In fact, do *believers* ever really make an appearance in philosophy of religion? Is it not most often taken up instead with *beliefs*? Judging from the shape of the conversation in contemporary philosophy of religion, one would guess that “religion” is a feature of brains-in-a-vat, lingering in a particularly spiritual ether but never really bumping into the grittiness of practices and community. Indeed, one wonders whether such “believers” really even need to go through the hassle of getting up on Sunday morning. Once the beliefs are “deposited,” it is hard to see what more is needed to be faithful.³

The renaissance in philosophy of religion in the past thirty years has been beholden, I would contend, to a lingering rationalism or intellectualism which remains at least haunted (if not perhaps *governed*) by a Cartesian anthropology that tends to construe the human person as, in essence, a “thinking thing.” Because it assumes a philosophical anthropology that privileges the cognitive and rational, philosophy of religion thus construes religion as a primarily epistemological phenomenon. As a result, the “religion” in philosophy of religion is a very cognitive, “heady” phenomenon—reduced to be-

3. One might legitimately wonder whether this is an indication of the overwhelmingly Protestant influence in contemporary philosophy of religion. Here I think Abraham’s criticisms of Plantinga are on point, particularly the lingering individualism in Plantinga’s account (49–50). Where is the church in Plantinga’s vision of warranted Christian belief?

iefs, propositions, and cognitive content, which are the only phenomena that can make it through the narrow theoretical gate that attends such rationalism. Believers, insofar as they appear, seem to be little more than talking heads. The result is a reductionism: religion, which is primarily a “form of life” and lived experience, is slimmed down to the more abstract phenomena of beliefs and doctrines. The rich, dynamic, lived experience of worshipping communities is reduced to propositions that can be culled from artifacts produced by these communities (for example, documents, creeds, Scriptures). If philosophy of religion pays any attention to liturgy or other religious practices, it is usually only in order to mine the “artifacts” of liturgy for new “ideas.”

Thus philosophy of religion as currently practiced tends to reflect a working (or at least functional) assumption that doctrine is prior to liturgy and thus ideas and propositions trump practices. Practiced in this rationalist mode, philosophy of religion finds a ready-made proportionality to theological doctrines, ideas, and propositions. Hence what has flourished in philosophy of religion has been philosophical theology of a particular sort.⁴ At best, this amounts to a reduction of “religion” to propositional thinking, a narrowing of the richness of religious lived experience. At worst, the result is not just a “thinning” of religion, but a falsification of it, insofar as religion construed as primarily a cognitive or propositional or epistemological phenomenon fails to discern the heart of religion as practice.

What one works on is often a reflection of one’s tools. If all I have is a hammer and nails, I am not equipped to work on an electric circuit. In that vein, contemporary philosophy of religion is equipped with a tool belt made for thinking about thinking—analyzing concepts of a certain sort. As a result, the philosopher of religion is only equipped to “work on” religion insofar as it can be made (and thus cut down) to the measure of conceptual, cognitive thinking.⁵ Attention to aspects of religion as a form of life and set of practices would require a different, or at least expanded, tool belt.⁶

Thus I think the most promising and radical aspect of Abraham’s project is his clarion call for philosophy of religion to develop “an account that will

4. For instance, when philosophers of religion turn to a consideration of prayer, it is primarily the epistemological challenges that are focused upon, or issues of how prayer can be reconciled with the doctrines of God’s omniscience and omnipotence. See, e.g., Eleonore Stump, “Petitionary Prayer,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 81–91, and Lawrence Masek, “Petitionary Prayer to an Omnipotent and Omnibenevolent God,” in *Philosophical Theology: Reason and Theological Doctrine*, Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association 74 (2000): 273–83. For a contrasting philosophical engagement with prayer, see Peter Ochs, “Morning Prayer as Redemptive Thinking,” in *Liturgy, Time, and the Politics of Redemption*, ed. C. C. Pecknold and Randi Rashkover (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006): 50–90.

5. I do not think this is a phenomenon unique to “analytic” or Anglo-American philosophy. Much “continental” philosophy of religion also exhibits an epistemological fixation.

6. For further discussion, see James K. A. Smith, “Philosophy of Religion Takes Practice: Liturgy as Source and Method in Philosophy of Religion,” in *Contemporary Method and Practice in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. David Cheetham and Rolfe King (London: Continuum, 2008), 133–47.

begin to do justice both to the faith of the ordinary believer and to the faith of the saints and martyrs” (10). This will require retooling the conceptual framework in philosophy of religion to do justice to the thickness and particularity of Christian faith, which Abraham describes as “canonical theism” in contrast to the thinned-out, “mere” theism that is usually the currency of philosophers of religion. Canonical theism is

that rich vision of God, creation, and redemption developed over time in the scriptures, articulated in the Nicene Creed, celebrated in the liturgy of the church, enacted in the lives of the saints, handed over and received in the sacraments, depicted in iconography, articulated by canonical teachers, mulled over in the fathers, and treasured, preserved, and guarded by the episcopate. (43)

The Christian does not just believe in God as *causa sui* or a fine-tuner of the universe; she believes in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jesus Christ. Abraham’s articulation of a specifically *canonical* theism might be seen as a kind of Pascalian project.

In addition to the thickness and specificity of the *content* of canonical theism, Abraham is also attentive to *how* Christians come to believe. One does not come to canonical faith magically or by a merely interior operation of the Holy Spirit (*pace* Plantinga?). Abraham’s proposal stems directly from his work on the history of evangelism and conversion, particularly the role of catechesis and material practices of formation (51).⁷ Based on this he “became convinced that becoming a Christian—or better, Christian initiation—was not first and foremost gaining a theory of knowledge but was coming to love the God identified in the rich canonical heritage of the church. In bringing people to faith the church articulated a very particular vision of God, creation, and redemption that had to be seen as a whole and received as a whole” (xiii). Because of its rationalism or intellectualism, philosophy of religion has been inattentive to the material practices that nurture and give rise to the thick particularity of Christian faith.⁸ Thus Abraham rightly and persistently calls for an account of belief and knowledge that can “take seriously the kind of epistemic suggestions advanced by the ordinary believer” (45).⁹ And I have tried to provide a brief exposition of the project precisely because I think Abraham’s project hints at a paradigm shift in philosophy of religion that can do justice to understanding just what was happening on that

7. See William Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).

8. I think a similar criticism is articulated by Evan Fales’s critique of Plantinga in “Proper Basicity,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 68 (2004): 373–83.

9. The interests or concerns of the “ordinary believer” are not those of the tenured academician: “Those who heard the word of God had more on their minds than recording the phenomenological features of their experience” (61). On the flip side, Abraham also rightly reminds the philosophers that the Word did not become flesh in order to generate dissertations in epistemology: “Nor did God send his Son so that we might hold extended seminars on ontology and metaphysics” (63).

winter night of baptismal resurrection—in a way that intellectualist paradigms cannot. Thus I suggest that Abraham begins to articulate an epistemology for the rest of us.

In this respect, I am reminded of the book, *How the Other Half Worships*,¹⁰ a photographic essay documenting the varied spaces in which many Christians worship. Outside the few who actually worship in cathedrals and pristine New England oak-lined sanctuaries, the majority of Christians worship the risen Lord in storefronts and mud huts, ramshackle lean-tos, and dark, dingy basements. Intellectualist philosophy of religion has given us cathedral epistemologies; Abraham's canonical theism points toward a storefront "epistemology."

Why Another "Theism"? Completing the Paradigm Shift

My deep sympathy with this project leads me to a critical question: Are "ordinary believers" really canonical theists? Is another—albeit thick, particular—theism really a radical alternative to the "mere" theism which has been the staple of philosophy of religion? Is this perhaps still too intellectualist? Here I mean only to invite Abraham to consider what it might look like to pursue his project even further. While he rightly rejects the cognitivism or intellectualism that reigns in contemporary philosophy of religion, does a concern with canonical *theism* still remain rather distant from the lived religion of "ordinary believers?" While he rightly contests the "primacy of epistemology" (21), do Abraham's "ordinary believers" still seem a bit fixated on the propositional content (43) and doctrinal assertions (41) embedded in canonical theism? Though he is surely right to note that "[i]t is odd to think of Jesus conducting seminars on epistemology for his disciples" (20), might it not also be odd to think that Jorge was drawn to the baptismal tank because he longed to become a "canonical theist?" I suspect, in fact, that Jorge would have a hard time knowing just what a canonical theist is and would be surprised to learn that he is one. I think Jorge would be especially surprised to find out that "canonical theism is first and foremost a rich ontology" (44).

My concern is that Abraham does not follow up on his own hints of a paradigm shift. Instead, the account remains fixated on the "intellectual content" of canonical theism (41, 45) and the "assertions" and "propositions" that constitute it as an "intellectual entity" in a way that would remain foreign, I think, to many "ordinary believers." This is crystallized, for instance, in his nuanced account of the "logic or grammar of revelation" (81). While Abraham criticizes the "explanatory hypothesis" as "too intellectualist and

10. Camilo Jose Vergara, *How the Other Half Worships* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

rationalistic” because it construes belief formation as “fundamentally a matter of forming theories and then testing them by data and evidence” (71), I worry that his own phenomenology of divine revelation still construes the confrontation as a primarily *cognitive* or *intellectual* affair.¹¹ Suggesting that the “core meaning” of revelation is “disclosure” (84) keeps revelation quite solidly tied to a theoretical or intellectual lexicon, a matter of “seeing” things differently—as if the primary *telos* of revelation was to engender “belief.” He takes it that revelation involves the crossing of an *intellectual* threshold” (92, emphasis added). Or, in other words, “the acceptance of divine revelation” is “a world-constituting experience for the believer” (92).

My question is whether the phenomenology of the *confrontation* (64) that characterizes divine revelation is aptly or properly characterized in terms of intellectual content. Does the construal of divine revelation/confrontation as an intellectual event indicate a lingering intellectualism that characterizes canonical theism? Is the event of revelation and divine confrontation primarily an event of illumination and crossing an “intellectual threshold?” Or should our phenomenology of revelation recognize it as first and foremost a kind of precognitive, affective *seizure* of our desire—a *capturing* of our imagination on a register that is not readily commensurate with the intellect? A more persistent rejection of intellectualism and rationalism in philosophy of religion will eschew intellectualist pictures of the human person and instead emphasize that we are primarily affective, desiring animals—and that the thickness and particularity of the Gospel (which, it seems to me, remains still thicker than “canonical theism”) grips our “hearts” before it ever gets articulated as a “theism”—even a rich, canonical theism. While the event of revelation/divine confrontation is “world-constituting,” it is important to emphasize—following Heidegger—that constitution happens at a level that is *pre*cognitive.¹² Before they’re ever “intellectual,” “ordinary believers” are gripped by divine revelation in a way that is irreducible to the cognitive.¹³

11. Abraham suggests that “a prophet or apostle occupies a radically different intellectual space. . . . What sets a prophet apart is epistemology. The critical appeal is to divine encounter and divine speaking” (82). While he means to emphasize that this is a *different* intellectual space or appeal, I am asking whether we should think about it first and foremost as an *intellectual* event.

12. This would take us to an important debate between Husserl and Heidegger concerning the most primal or fundamental mode in which we constitute the world. For discussion, see Smith, *Speech and Theology: Language and the Logic of Incarnation* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 70–82.

13. And I do not mean to suggest that this is just true of “simple” or uneducated believers. I think it remains true of theologians with academic credentials, too—despite all the stories/theories we might develop otherwise—theories which paint us as primarily cognitive animals.

Conclusion

William Abraham's project is animated by a desire for philosophy of religion to remember "ordinary believers" and the ways ordinary folks come to faith in Jesus Christ. This is informed by his historical understanding of conversion and catechesis in the early church, but also a contemporary sensitivity to the dynamics of conversion (chapter 7).¹⁴ Our philosophical accounts of the nature of Christian belief will only be fitting and illuminating to the extent that they can help us to understand how "ordinary" folks believe—that is, folks without PhDs or college degrees, who do not share the philosophers' fixation on epistemology. Too often our *Christian* philosophizing betrays the fact that we tend to paint all believers in our own rationalist image, as if all believers spend their time fretting about coherentist accounts of truth, vexed by issues of warrant that plague testimony, or persistently haunted by the specter of antirealism. We do well to be reminded otherwise—to discipline our theoretical reflection by regularly confronting it with "ordinary" believers with whom we worship each Sunday.¹⁵ By pushing philosophy of religion to go to church, so to speak, William Abraham's project invites us to get to work articulating an epistemology for the rest of us.

14. It seems to me that in the literature of Reformed epistemology, very rarely do we find prototypical "believers" who are *converts*; more often than not, "Jane" or "Jones" just find themselves believing, have never *not* believed. Does this indicate the theological and ecclesiastical experiences that inform our philosophizing?

15. Unfortunately, Sunday worship is not always a corrective on this score given the realities of class division and the common phenomenon of "the university church"—a congregation where, in fact, many *do* exhibit the kinds of "believing" that one finds in the dominant paradigm in philosophy of religion.