

# Vocation and Christian Doctrine: A Response to John Stackhouse

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There is much to like in John Stackhouse's new book, *Need to Know: Vocation as the Heart of Christian Epistemology* (2014). After all, we certainly need direction in a world as uncertain as this one. Stackhouse wants to commend to his readers a way of approaching the Christian faith that takes ecclesiastical tradition seriously "whilst also learning from contemporary culture" (18). The book "offers an epistemology: an outline of just how Christians ought to think about whatever they are called to think about" (18). He is convinced that God calls us to a particular kind of life and because God calls us to a particular sort of life he can be trusted to provide us with what we need to know to live that life (19). This is his understanding of *vocation*—a notion that is at the heart of the book's message, as well as its title. The idea seems to be about giving shape to Christian epistemology in light of the various vocations we have been given. And he really does think that if this is to be a truly Christian epistemology, it must apply to all walks of life, from garbage collectors to philosophers and theologians.<sup>1</sup> (Some of us may think that these are not distinct vocations at all, but that is another matter.)

## Approaching Stackhouse's Christian Epistemology

So, how does vocation shape our approach to the Christian faith and to knowing what God wants us to do (i.e. to our respective vocations)? Readers of recent philosophical accounts of religious epistemology will be expecting a carefully crafted account of belief acquisition, and of what it is that makes justified true belief knowledge in the case of religious beliefs—in this case, specifically Christian beliefs. Stackhouse is aware of this literature and cites it in the footnotes, but he deliberately avoids providing a grand epistemological story in the tradition of Alston, Plantinga, Swinburne, or Wolterstorff. Instead, he adopts a more piecemeal approach, drawing upon the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. This comprises Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, with Scripture in the place of pre-eminence as divine revelation, or at least, the bearer of divine revelation. Stackhouse claims this quadrilateral for all Christians (16)—a move that will no doubt leave the hearts of his Wesleyan readers strangely warmed. Yet it needs supplementing so as to be fit for

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<sup>1</sup> Stackhouse thinks that there are two convictions that together comprise his account of vocation (19), but I am not clear what the difference between these two convictions amounts to, so I have collapsed them into one for the purposes of exposition.

purpose in addressing the needs of contemporary believers. So he provides his own Pentalectic (as he calls it on p. 148) that includes experience, tradition, scholarship, art, and Scripture. “We typically draw on these five resources—or whichever of them we believe will be pertinent to a given subject,” he says, “by way of three modes of apprehension and consideration: reason, intuition, and imagination” (93). These are the elements of what he calls the Basic Scheme for Christian Epistemology, that is, his own account of what God ensures we are in a position to know in order to fulfill our respective vocations.

## Questions

There is much more that could be said about this Basic Scheme and its elements. However, rather than spending the rest of my time rehearsing the elements of Stackhouse’s position, which can be read at leisure in his book, I want to turn to consider some issues that his account raises for Christian doctrine and vocation, both of which are important issues his volume addresses.

We want to have ordered, consistent beliefs that are internally coherent. That is surely an intellectual virtue to which we can all aspire. But having ordered, consistent beliefs is usually not thought to be sufficient in the Christian tradition: for the vast majority of Christian thinkers down the centuries our beliefs should also be truth-apt (i.e. appropriate bearers of truth-value), truth-aimed, and, where possible, true *simpliciter*. Our beliefs must (in some sense) measure up to the truth of the matter—to borrow a term from St. Anselm of Canterbury. At least, that’s the ambition of much historic Christian thought. The vast majority of Christian thinkers have been theological realists of one sort or another. They believed that there is a mind-independent world created by God, and that we can know things about that mind-independent world, and about the God who creates it. Nevertheless, when it comes to cardinal matters of Christian belief, theologians often prescind from claiming that we have access to truth *simpliciter*, preferring instead more modest claims about models or metaphors or narratives that are merely approximations to the truth of the matter as it has been revealed to us. (Consider, for example, the myriad models of the atonement, or of the Trinity, or even the way in which many classical orthodox theologians refuse to say anything substantive about divine nature, except for noting that it is ineffable.<sup>2</sup>)

Such a claim about the ambitions of Christian theology might be taken in one of several directions. First, it could be thought of as a claim about *epistemic adequacy*. Then the idea would be that Christian doctrine cannot get at certain truths about, say, the divine nature—until or unless they are revealed to us by God. What little we are told in Scripture gives us some indication of what God is like, but our vantage is always limited because our

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<sup>2</sup> I withhold the obvious objection at this juncture, namely, that it appears to be self-referentially incoherent to claim that God is ineffable, since if God is ineffable he is completely unknowable. But to claim that God is ineffable is to claim that we can know at least one truth about the divine nature, namely, that God is ineffable. I withhold this objection because it is obvious, and has been rehearsed elsewhere, but also because it may be a superficial objection that fails to take seriously exactly what apophatic theologians are really claiming about the divine nature. For more on this in recent analytic theology, see Jacobs (forthcoming).

purview is finite, and our access to God almost entirely dependent on his condescension towards us. What little we can know about God is, we might think, epistemically adequate for the theological task set before us, though it is far short of a complete understanding of God and his purposes for us all things considered. Of course, such epistemological humility in theology is consistent with theological realism, and there is much in what Stackhouse says that seems consistent with this proposal.

Alternatively, we could understand the impetus to construct doctrinal models that approximate the truth of the matter in terms of *constructivism*. On this way of thinking, human concepts and language about the world are constituents of conceptual schemes or frameworks that stand between the inquirer and the world.<sup>3</sup> Our understanding of the world is mediated to us by means of these conceptual schemes. So, according to constructivism, the Christian does not have immediate access to a mind-independent world (though there may be a mind-independent world). Our knowledge of the world around us is conceptually mediated. Some modern theologians attracted to constructivism have argued that Christian theology must be fashioned from the ground up. We do not have unmediated access to a mind-independent world, so we are left with constructing various accounts of the divine that we hope approximate to the truth of the matter, though in the final analysis we cannot know whether they actually latch on to the truth of the matter (however that may be achieved). Others, perceiving that any concept of God we construe is, in constructivist terms, merely part of our conceptual schemes, declare that any substantive account of the divine must be an idol.

Does either of these views describe Stackhouse's project? He is not a fan of idolatry, any more than he is an aficionado of constructivism in Christian theology. But neither is he committed to the notion that a properly Christian epistemology *must* be one that is truth-apt, and aimed at truth. At the beginning of his study he says, "the point of the Christian life, and of human life, *is not to arrive at correct ideas . . . the point of life here and now is to make as much shalom [i.e. flourishing, fruitfulness, peace] as possible*" (20, emphasis added). This is a significant admission for someone attempting to provide a Christian epistemology! He goes even further in a footnote on the same page, where he says this: "God allows us, even directs us *... to believe things that are not true in order to make us most useful in his service*. So, scandalous as it seems *prima facie* to say that the Holy Spirit does not invariably teach us the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, I place the rock of stumbling squarely in the way, and will try to justify it in what follows" (20, fn. 23, emphasis added).

Later, he returns to this matter in a short aside about divine accommodation in a section of the book dealing with the epistemic implications of vocation (ch. 2, p. 82). God accommodates himself to our limitations in revelation so that (as Calvin famously put it in his *Institutes*) he lisps to us as a nursemaid does to a small child (1960, 1.13.1). Stackhouse takes the notion of divine accommodation as a corollary of what I am calling our limited epistemic vantage, as well as (what seems to be) a version of epistemic fallibilism—the view that our beliefs cannot be rationally supported in a conclusive or final manner. He thinks that we are not in a position to know the truth about many important theological matters (perhaps, many important matters, period) independent of God revealing them to

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<sup>3</sup> See (Hector 2011).

us. Moreover, God may have to reveal things to us by means of accommodation—divine lispings that merely approximates to the truth of the matter because we cannot understand the truth *simpliciter* (perhaps we are cognitively incapable of understanding such things, or perhaps we are not yet sufficiently spiritually developed to understand them, or perhaps there is some other reason—whatever the reason is, we are not in a position to apprehend the truth of the matter *simpliciter*). He even quotes Nicholas Wolterstorff from his *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* with approval: “It may even be that the belief content of my Christian commitment contains certain falsehood. Frequently in teaching children one tells them what is, strictly speaking, false. So it may be that some of what God says to us is, strictly speaking, false, accommodated to our frailty. Yet it may be that we are obliged to believe it” (Wolterstorff, 156, cited by Stackhouse on 82, fn. 31).

Still later in the book, the question of truth arises again, this time in the context of developing the Basic Scheme.<sup>4</sup> At this juncture, as he sets out the importance of context and situation (we might even say, with a nod to our New Testament colleagues, the *sitz im leben*) in relation to interpreting reality (as he puts it). In explaining the ubiquity of interpretation he says that truth is “a quality or a property, not a thing” (141). In fact, it is a quality of interpretation such that to the extent that the interpretation corresponds to the reality, it is true (141-142). He goes on to say, “So *truth* is a quality of *interpretations* or *representations* by which we denote the extent to which they resemble *reality*—both in an absolute sense (technically, according to their *correspondence*) and in a relative sense of their usefulness in that task (technically, according to their *pragmatic value*)” (143, emphasis original). Indeed, truth, like knowledge, is not merely something binary, so that you either know it or you don’t. Instead, according to Stackhouse, both truth and knowledge are on a continuum (145) or scale so that you can know something more or less, depending on how the matter is approached.

What are we to make of this? It appears that Stackhouse wants to affirm a moderate version of epistemic realism. We really can know certain things about a mind-independent world. Nevertheless, our knowledge of matters divine is accommodated, which he seems to equate with being merely proximate to the truth of the matter. He sometimes says things that seem to press in the direction of constructivism, for truth is a quality of interpretations or representations, and that sounds a lot like reality being mediated by conceptual schemes. (I read Scripture, which seems to be saying that God is eternal. I think that means he is outside time, but this is admittedly only one construal of the biblical material, one interpretation or representation of the picture of God we find painted there by various authors in various ways that depends on a cluster of concepts that yield a particular “picture” of the divine nature.) Stackhouse uses the example of a map to make his point about truth and knowledge being on a continuum (141-145). Just as a map gives us true knowledge of where *x* is relative to the other structures represented on the map, so that we can orient ourselves towards *x*, it is also false in the sense that the world represented in the map is not the same as the real world. It is an approximation, a false but helpful representation of a much more complex reality. The idea seems to be that God can provide

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<sup>4</sup> He also deals with truth in giving an account of the current situation in chapter 1, and vocational thinking in chapter 2. However, these are largely reporting the views of others, not setting out his own account. Consequently, I shall pass over these other places at which he discusses truth.

us with false but helpful ways of thinking about the world (the example of the creation account in Genesis 1-3 comes immediately to mind) and that this is an appropriate sort of accommodation to our cognitive limitations.

It seems to me that the doctrine of divine accommodation does much to help the theologian faced with certain textual difficulties, and a principled use can be made of this notion. It also seems to me that much Christian doctrine does depend in important respects upon conceptual schemes, and models that, like models in the sciences, are approximations to the truth of the matter. They are generalized descriptions of much more complex data that often cannot be grasped without the model, or upon which we have only an imperfect grasp. Many theologians would concede as much with regard to doctrines that have no formal dogmatic definition, such as the atonement—a doctrine where models proliferate. But the same is surely true of doctrines like the Trinity that do have a clearer dogmatic form. After all, as soon as we stray beyond the creedal language of persons and natures (itself the product of certain conceptual schemes) to speak of what we mean by persons and by natures in respect to the Godhead, we are already on the way toward a model of the divine nature.

Yet one can surely reason as follows: God reveals certain things about himself (in Scripture, say); these things are the basis for Christian doctrine; doctrines form the rudiments of dogmatic models (of the atonement, Trinity, and so on); and these are simplified descriptions of realities that are more complex—perhaps more complex than we are able to grasp, as in the case of the divine essence. Such a position would be consistent with a realist conception of Christian theology. But it would not necessarily commit the theologian to the addition claim that God ensures we believe falsehoods. One could understand it in this way, of course. My point is one need not do so. Here is why: according to the reasoning just given, what God conveys is the material in Scripture that forms the raw material for Christian doctrine, not the doctrines themselves, nor the models that we construct on the basis of these doctrines. Both doctrine and the models we form on the basis of doctrine are, on this way of thinking, the products of human reflection on the divine deposit in Scripture (and perhaps the tradition).

There are things Stackhouse says that appears consistent with this view. However, recall this claim that God “allows us, even directs us ... *to believe things that are not true in order to make us most useful in his service.*” This raises a question: Does God deceive us? Does he ensure we believe (at least some) falsehoods, though they are pragmatically useful fictions? Stackhouse seems to think that he does. Yet it is one thing to say that God accommodates himself to our limitations in revelation. It is quite another to say he deceives us. Accommodation need not entail the communication of false propositions. Suppose we allow that Scripture may convey things that are false, for instance, information about the shape of the world (that it is a flat disc held up by pillars, and so on). Even if we concede this much, it is not clear to me that the theologian must also say that *God* intends to convey this information. God may co-opt the message of a particular author to convey a particular idea, or concept using material that affirms other things he does not affirm (such as that the earth is a flat disc). That is accommodation of a sort, but it is the sort that doesn’t present quite the same problems to which, on the face of it, Stackhouse seems committed.

This brings us back to where we started: the question of vocation. Given the foregoing an obvious question for Stackhouse is: How does his account of the function of Christian doctrine fit with his understanding of vocation? If God provides us with what we

need to know in order to fulfill the vocations to which he has called us, does that mean that God, like the cynical director of a federal intelligence agency, will ensure that we have the wherewithal to carry out the tasks he has assigned us, even if it means providing us with misinformation—even, disinformation—in order to achieve these goals? Does the end, that is, the call placed upon us by God, justify the means, that is, the potentially misinformation-ridden understanding of God and his purposes provided for the task set before us? I have suggested that Stackhouse need not go this route if he tweaks what he wants to say about the function of doctrine in relation to revelation. (Roughly: what God reveals of his purposes in Scripture is true, irrespective of any pragmatic value. Yet doctrine and theological models developed on the basis of doctrine may only be proxies for the truth of the matter, and such an arrangement may indeed have pragmatic value for Christian vocation.) This is offered as a friendly suggestion to an author whose book has much from which we can learn about the nature and shape of vocation.

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