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*The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 79, No. 1. (Jan., 1999), pp. 1-18.

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*The Journal of Religion* is currently published by The University of Chicago Press.

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# How Epistemology Matters to Theology\*

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## PROLEGOMENA

Epistemology has mattered a great deal to theology since the seventeenth century. It is the central thesis of this essay that it has mattered mostly in the wrong way, and that the effects upon theology of taking epistemology out of its proper station have been very largely negative. In extreme cases these effects have included the abandonment of theology; and even in more moderate instances the result has been a Babylonian captivity in which theology has become a worshipper of alien epistemological gods and has been gagged and fettered by them so that she can only whisper where she ought declaim and hobble where she ought stride. It is not that epistemology is irrelevant to theology; but its role is that of servant, not master, and when this is not properly understood epistemic tests are likely to become to theology as Jephthah's pronunciation test was to the Ephraimites (Judges 12): a condition upon survival that cannot be met. The Ephraimites could have passed Jephthah's test only by abandoning their natural and native tongue; this is also what epistemology requires of theology when its tests are given excessive weight. And, just like the Ephraimites, theology has often given up the ghost because of her inability to reshape her discourse. This is evident in the work of some among the most prominent of contemporary theologians: they retain the name but almost none of the substance of theological work. I shall discuss the writing of Schubert Ogden as an example later in this essay.

But first some definitional ground clearing will be useful. I suggest that we take both "theology" and "epistemology" to denote, in the first instance, intellectual disciplines whose product is (or is intended to be) *logia*, reasoned discourse. In the case of theology the object of the reasoned discourse is God (*theos*), while in the case of epistemology it is knowledge

\* Thanks to Chris Gamwell, Kathryn Tanner, Phil Devenish, Del Kiernan-Lewis, Chuck Mathewes, Derek Jeffreys, Jonathan Gold, and Joe Pettit, most of whom continue to disagree with most of what I say in this essay, but from each of whom I have learned.

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(*episteme*). Both disciplines are constructive and normative in that they intend to say what their respective objects are like, which involves discriminating true from false claims about them. Both also tend toward the systematic, which is to say that they typically pay attention to the ways in which their deliverances are and ought to be ordered, as well as to the ways in which these deliverances are and ought to be related to those of other intellectual disciplines.

The central or constitutive question of theology is: What is God like?<sup>1</sup> In the case of Christian theology<sup>2</sup> this question is inevitably and properly pursued by adverting to Jesus Christ,<sup>3</sup> and this means, also necessarily, by adverting primarily to what the chief witnesses to Jesus Christ say and have said. These witnesses are first and most fundamentally Scripture<sup>4</sup> and second and derivatively the traditions of interpreting and proclaiming Scripture in the Church.<sup>5</sup> And, since theology is an intellectual discipline that aims at the production of reasoned discourse about its topic, it will necessarily also aim at truth.

The central or constitutive question of epistemology, by contrast, is: What is knowledge? While this is certainly not a new question (it interested Plato, for example, as well as philosophers in India from the early centuries of the Christian era onward),<sup>6</sup> the idea that there is a philosophical discipline treating it of sufficient importance to be given status and treatment (not to mention a name) independently of metaphysics (and its more capacious cousin, ontology) is much newer. This is suggested by the fact that the term “epistemology” is a relatively recent coinage in English, not much used before the second half of the nineteenth century, and even then usually flagged as a novelty to be defined and defended. The defin-

<sup>1</sup> Augustine says that “theology” is a Greek word that means thought or speech about divinity (by which he means the nature of God): “quo verbo Graeco [sc. theologia] significari intellegimus de divinitate rationem sive sermonem” (*De civitate dei* viii.1). Aquinas says that God is the topic of the science of theology: “dicendum quod Deus est subjectum huius scientiae [sc. theologiae]” (*Summa Theologiae* I.1.7c).

<sup>2</sup> Christian theology is of course not the only variety thereof, but it is the only one to which I shall pay any attention in what follows.

<sup>3</sup> Following Karl Barth, throughout *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, sec. 1.1.

<sup>4</sup> Following Bonaventure (and many others) who identifies theology with Holy Scripture: “in hoc verbo [sc. Eph. 3:14–19] [Paulus] aperit sacrae Scripturae, quae theologia dicitur, ortum, progressum et statum” (*Breviloquium*, prologue, 1). He also says that theology is speech about God and about the first principle: “Qua vero theologia sermo est de Deo et de primo principio” (*Breviloquium*, prologue, 6.6).

<sup>5</sup> Following Barth: “As a theological discipline dogmatics is the scientific self-examination of the Christian Church with respect to the content of its distinctive talk about God” (head to sec. 1). “Theology is a function of the Church” (sec. 1.1).

<sup>6</sup> The most interesting Platonic discussion of epistemological questions is in the *Theaetetus*. A foundational example of Indian discussion may be found in *Nyāyasūtra* 1,1,3–22 and the enormous commentarial literature thereto.

ing question of epistemology is typically pursued by proffering an argumentative account of what knowledge is (and of associated questions such as how it is gained, lost, maintained, and extended) that presents itself as comprehensible and convincing to any normally equipped human being who is prepared to give it the attention it deserves. The chief virtues of such an account are, then, coherence and explanatory power: discerning and arguing about the presence or absence of these in candidate accounts is mostly what epistemologists do.<sup>7</sup> Like theology, epistemology aims, typically, to offer a systematic and true set of answers to its central question and to those significantly related to it.

Defining theology and epistemology in this way raises the question of how they ought to be related. One view about this is that theological discourse ought to be constrained and controlled by adherence to universal epistemic principles, principles that apply not only to it but to all discourse whatsoever, and not only to theologians but to everyone. To this view I now turn.

### UNIVERSAL EPISTEMIC PRINCIPLES AND THEOLOGY

Imagine that you are considering a claim whose belief-worthiness you cannot easily or immediately decide. You are then likely to look for an epistemic principle that will permit you to decide the claim's belief-worthiness. Such a principle will ordinarily specify a property that any claim of the relevant kind should have in order to be worthy of belief. The property so specified will neither (again, ordinarily) assume the truth of the claim you are considering nor will it be among the truth conditions of that claim. Were it so to do or so to be, the question of whether the claim is belief-worthy would collapse into the question of whether it is true. And since the point of the exercise is to decide whether the claim in question ought to be believed independently of deciding whether it is true, it will be illegitimate to include the property you seek among the truth conditions of the claim that concerns you, or to build the truth of the claim into the property you seek. The property specified by your epistemic principle may of course be strongly truth conducive (e.g., in matters of baseball, *being the ruling of the best umpire in the business*); but it need not be (e.g., in matters of physics, *being believed by most physicists at the moment*). In either case, the primary point of attempts to discern whether the claim possesses the property is to see whether the claim ought to be

<sup>7</sup> For recent representative examples of work in epistemology see Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Richard Fumerton, *Metaepistemology and Skepticism* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995). I shall draw heavily and gratefully upon Plantinga's work in what follows.

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lied, not to see whether it is true. So, whether strongly truth conducive or not, if you can successfully sort out whether the proposition you are considering possesses the epistemically desirable property specified by your epistemic principle, you will thereby have sorted out whether you ought to believe it; but you will not necessarily have sorted out whether it is true.

An example. You are faced with the claim that *more people currently live in Beijing than in Mumbai*, and you are unsure whether to believe it. You look for an epistemic principle to help you, and you decide upon the following: *Whatever is explicitly stated to be true in the most recent edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica (and whatever is implied by what is so stated) is belief-worthy*. You check to see whether your claim possesses the epistemically desirable property mentioned in this principle, and you find that it does (or that its contradictory does), and as a result you believe it (or you believe its contradictory). Your epistemic principle has done its work.

The epistemic principle in this case has a couple of important features. The first is that it is a species of appeal to authority. And the second is that it propounds only a sufficient condition for belief-worthiness. This means that there may be belief-worthy claims without this property (perhaps in disciplines about which the *Encyclopedia* says nothing or which it treats incompletely). The principle is therefore not universal in scope in the sense that not all belief-worthy propositions need to possess the property it specifies. Neither is the principle binding upon all rational people. There may be some for whom it is irrelevant—those who do not read English, for instance, or those who do not read at all. The principle's scope is therefore limited in a second sense: not only does it not have to do with all belief-worthy propositions but it also does not have purchase upon all believing subjects.

Another example, this one from John Locke:

Five or six Friends meeting at my Chamber, and discoursing on a Subject very remote from this, found themselves quickly at a stand, by the Difficulties that rose on every side. After we had a while puzzled our selves, without coming any nearer a Resolution of those Doubts which perplexed us, it came into my Thoughts that we took a wrong course; and that, before we set our selves upon Enquiries of that Nature, it was necessary to examine our own Abilities, and see, what Objects our Understandings were, or were not fitted to deal with.<sup>8</sup>

The “Subject very remote” about which Locke and his friends puzzled was, we know from other sources, morality and revealed religion.<sup>9</sup> What

<sup>8</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> See Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Locke’s Philosophy of Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, ed. Vere Chappell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 172–98, quote at p. 174. Wolterstorff here cites and discusses the analysis of this question in Maurice Cranston’s biography of Locke.

he wanted (and what the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* provides) was a set of epistemic principles for the discrimination of what ought from what ought not be believed, initially upon those matters, but eventually upon everything. These principles, thought Locke, should be usable without prior commitment as to the truth or falsehood of particular positions in metaphysics or ontology. If they were not so usable they would, he thought, fail in the purpose for which they had been developed, which was precisely to discriminate acceptable from unacceptable beliefs without having to decide about the truth of those beliefs. This is to say that Locke wanted to be able to rule on such questions de jure rather than de facto: to determine not that a particular claim is true (or false) and ought as a result be (or not be) believed; but rather to determine that belief in it offends (or does not offend) against the epistemic principles governing rational assent and as a result ought be recommended (or discouraged). In his own words, he wanted to “find out those Measures, whereby a rational Creature put in that State, which Man is in, in this world, may, and ought to govern his Opinions.”<sup>10</sup> These measures, if successfully found, would not only be applicable universally but would be recognizably so: they would rule out the possibility that anyone (or any group) could have privileged access to what is true. Such measures are the intellectual correlate and requirement of the principles that inform both democratic politics and capitalist economics: the ballot box symbolizes them in the first case, and the dollar bill in the second.

Locke’s epistemic principles are then universal in a double sense.<sup>11</sup> They propound necessary and sufficient conditions for belief-worthiness. All claims that meet these conditions ought to be believed; none that do not ought to be believed. They are also universal in that every “rational Creature” ought to adhere to them and has the capacity to recognize them as binding simply in virtue of being rational, which is tantamount to saying simply in virtue of being human. There is in them no tincture of appeal to authority.

Epistemic principles of the kind embodied in my *Encyclopedia Britannica* example are both benign and strictly unavoidable in most spheres of human cognitive activity. We inevitably and properly form and maintain many of our beliefs by (explicitly or implicitly) relying upon authoritative testimony.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes we do this in knowing reliance upon arguments

<sup>10</sup> Locke, p. 46 (I.i.6).

<sup>11</sup> I have no space here to detail these principles. The *Essay*, in which this is done, extends to more than 700 pages in its standard edition. The best recent exposition is Nicholas Wolterstorff’s *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief*, Cambridge Studies in Religion and Critical Thought, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> On testimony as a source of warrant in belief, see C. A. J. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992). The best argument I know as to the unavoidability of

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that would demonstrate the putative authority to be an actual one (perhaps I could give such arguments about the authoritativeness of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). But more often we deploy epistemic principles of this sort without knowing or being able to say in virtue of what the testimony to which we attribute authority is authoritative. And this too is perfectly proper. Most of what I learned at my mother's knee and at school I came to know in this way, and a good deal of what I have learned in mathematics, logic, and theology has been learned similarly. This is an ordinary, indeed an unavoidable, aspect of human cognitive functioning: most often, coming to know more than we now know in any area of human inquiry has among its necessary conditions believing that certain things are the case upon the ground of authoritative testimony whose authority we cannot show to be such without already assuming it.<sup>13</sup>

But appeal to doubly universal epistemic principles of a Lockean kind is more dubious. This is for at least two reasons. The first is that such principles tend to be self-referentially incoherent in the sense that they prescribe criteria for belief-worthiness that they cannot themselves meet, from which it follows that they ought not (by their own standards) to be believed. Consider *a claim is belief-worthy if and only if there is some human experience that could conclusively verify it*. It is not easy to see what human experience could conclusively verify this claim. While this may not be a difficulty intrinsic to all universal epistemic principles, it does seem to be one that belongs to all such principles that have found a wide hearing.

A second difficulty is that the quest for epistemic principles is motivated in large part by a desire to fix belief about some matter independently of deciding its truth. This is why the epistemically desirable property specified by an epistemic principle should neither assume the truth of the claim to which it is applied nor be among that claim's truth conditions. The point of epistemic principles, recall, is to make a *de jure* rather than a *de facto* decision possible. But it is surely extremely difficult to propound a universal epistemic principle that assumes the truth of no claim to which it might be applied, and which is among the truth conditions of none—for if it is truly a universal epistemic principle it ought to be applicable to any claim at all.

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reliance upon authority for proper belief formation is in Yves Simon, *The Nature and Functions of Authority* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1948).

<sup>13</sup> A parallel example applies to sensory perception: no demonstration of the truth of the claim *trusting sensory perception is a reliable means of forming true beliefs* can succeed if it does not deploy the *demonstrandum* in the demonstration. But this interesting fact is compatible both with the *demonstrandum*'s being true, and with the assumption of its truth being a necessary condition for maintaining and extending our stock of true beliefs. On all this, see the arguments in William P. Alston's *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), and in more detail his *The Reliability of Sensory Perception* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993).

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These two probably insuperable difficulties notwithstanding, many still seek universal epistemic principles—or if not strictly universal ones, at least ones that can be used to control assent within the bounds of some particular discipline, such as theology. This is mostly because appeal to such principles permits a relatively easy taking of the philosophical high ground. It is messy (and very difficult, as Locke saw) to argue directly about the truth of (among others) specifically religious views of the nature of things. It is much easier (and much more likely to be dialectically successful, which is to say persuasive) to argue that those who have such views exhibit moral or epistemic defects of one kind or another. Perhaps they have not proportioned their beliefs to the evidence available, or they are cognitively immature, or they are insane, or they are premodern, or (most commonly in the United States now) they are fundamentalist.

The conviction that appeal to universal epistemic principle (in one or other or both of the senses of “universal” already distinguished) is essential for the discrimination of what Christians ought to believe from what they ought not to believe has not been equally distributed among Christian theologians in modern times. Academic English-language Protestant theology since Friedrich Schleiermacher has, for the most part, accepted it in one version or another. This is much less true of Catholic theology, partly because of its strongly Thomist nature until the second half of the twentieth century and partly because of ecclesiological and liturgical constraints that made (and still to some extent make) it more difficult for Catholics than Protestants to sit loose to a tradition of thought and practice for which it is very much not the case.<sup>14</sup> And, so far as my limited understanding goes, Orthodox theology has been very largely unaffected by the idea that epistemology is first philosophy. But for Protestant theologians in (or in bondage to) the academy, the epistemological strictures of Descartes, Locke, Hume, and Kant have become among the foundational intellectual assumptions within which all theological work is done.

When appeal to universal epistemic principle is taken to be basic to theology, the effects upon theology are always and inevitably destructive. This is because theology (the discipline, recall, of asking and attempting to answer the question of what God is like by adverting in the first instance to Jesus Christ, and then to the chief witnesses to Jesus Christ, which are Scripture and the traditions of interpreting and proclaiming Scripture in the Church) cannot permit controls upon her activity drawn

<sup>14</sup> J. H. Newman, for instance, to my taste and judgment the greatest nineteenth-century Catholic thinker to have paid sustained attention to epistemological questions, is emphatic and clear in his rejection of appeal to universal epistemic principles in anything other than a formal sense. When he engages in constructive epistemological work, as in the *Grammar of Assent* (first published in 1870), he does so in a way that gives the discipline its proper place, which is as an elucidatory servant of Christian faith as taught by the Church.

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from elsewhere than that which brought her into being, which is the response of a community of faith to the gifts of grace. Allowing appeal to universal epistemic principle to control what the Church is permitted to say when she does theology will always result in allowing her to say much less than she wants and ought to say: it will always place her in bondage.

Just how the effects upon theology of taking epistemology in this way become evident will depend, of course, upon the particulars of the epistemic principles deployed. It would be tedious and impossibly long-winded to offer here an abstract typology of all the possibilities. So instead, by way of illustration, I will take a particular case, that of Schubert Ogden. Some of the lessons to be gleaned from his case will be generalizable; and so it will usefully form the basis for the critical and constructive comments to be offered in the last part of this essay.

### THE CASE OF SCHUBERT OGDEN

Schubert Ogden has been (and continues to be) among the more influential voices in English-language Protestant academic theology. He has been publishing since 1953, and his work has consistently exhibited the virtues of clarity and conceptual precision. His work is among the most clearheaded and comprehensive attempts to explain to a mid-twentieth-century academic audience how theology ought to be understood as an intellectual discipline. It exhibits, too, at least on the surface and probably also in intent, a care for the Church and for Christian souls. I have chosen his work partly because it has all these virtues, but mostly because it exhibits with special clarity the epistemological emphases that interest me. Indeed, it seems to me that they are present in it in something very close to ideal-typical form. If, then, I can be successful in indicating how the argument goes and what is wrong with it in his case, I may be successful in indicating what is wrong with this way of thinking in general.

The central question I want to ask of Ogden is this: Does he think there are *de jure* objections to traditional (he might prefer “classical”) Christian belief in addition to *de facto* ones?<sup>15</sup> Put differently: Does he think that there are strictly epistemic objections to such belief in addition to convincing arguments as to its falsity? Put differently again: Does he exhibit any tendencies to think that Christians ought to control and delimit what they believe by appeal to universal epistemic principles, in either or both of the senses of “universal” I have distinguished? The answer to all these questions is yes, as I shall go on to show; I will also suggest that it is just

<sup>15</sup> I will not here give content to this phrase except to suggest that it might be useful to think of it in the first instance (to what Alvin Plantinga would call a “zeroeth approximation”) as the propositional content of the Nicene Creed.

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on this matter that Ogden's thought exhibits the confusions that usually belong to the type of theological thinking of which it is a token.

For Ogden, Christian theology is the "fully reflective understanding of the Christian witness of faith as decisive for human existence."<sup>16</sup> By "Christian witness" Ogden means all that Christians have said and done in the name of Christ. When theologians do theology, then, they engage in an intellectual activity whose object is this witness, and whose goal is to explain and defend what it means to understand it as capable of ordering and explaining human existence in a way that makes it what it ought to be.

This definition raises, as Ogden immediately notes, the question of assessment: What criteria ought to be used to discriminate between proper and improper, adequate and inadequate instances of theological understanding? What criteria ought to be used to discriminate between true and false claims in theology? Ogden suggests two: first, appropriateness to Christian witness, which means that a theological claim must represent "the same understanding of faith"<sup>17</sup> as does Christian witness, properly construed; and second, credibility to human experience in the sense that such claims must meet "the conditions of truth that are everywhere given with existence itself."<sup>18</sup> In the comments that follow I shall focus only on this second criterion since it raises the epistemological questions that interest me here. There is much to be said about the first criterion as well (I do not think that it can be successfully defended as Ogden develops it), and about the relations that Ogden takes to obtain between the two criteria (his views about this also exhibit confusion). But discussing these matters would take me too far afield.

The criterion of credibility to human existence as such suggests at first blush something like this: theological claims are true if and only if they accord with (do not contradict) what is true about human existence as such—which means, necessarily, with what is true about every instance of it.<sup>19</sup> It seems initially to be a formal criterion for the truth (and hence

<sup>16</sup> Schubert Ogden, *On Theology* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1992), p. 1. Compare Ogden, *Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many?* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1992), pp. 33–34. It is worth noting how different Ogden's understanding of the proper object of theology is from those of Augustine, Bonaventure, Aquinas, and Barth, cited earlier. This difference is principally because he has epistemological worries absent from their thought. The presence of these worries suggests already that he is on the wrong track.

<sup>17</sup> Ogden, *On Theology*, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5. Compare Ogden, *The Point of Christology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> It is worth noting, though I will not be able to pursue the matter in this essay, that Ogden takes it to be a property of all theological claims that they have to do with human existence. Following a cloud of Christian witnesses, some of them mentioned in earlier notes, I do not take this view.

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the adequacy) of any claims that have to do with human existence and, hence, also for the truth of any theological claims with that property. As such it is unexceptionable: if there are claims true of human existence as such (and every Christian ought to think there are, for instance, that all humans bear the property *having been created by God*), then any claim about human existence, theological or otherwise, that contradicts them must thereby be false. But it is often difficult to do much with formal statements of truth conditionality of this sort. In order to deploy them it is almost always necessary to know the substance of the conditions that such principles refer to formally. In the case of Ogden's credibility criterion, its useful deployment for sorting true from false (or belief-worthy from non-belief-worthy) theological claims requires knowing what is true about human existence as such.

When Ogden uses the credibility criterion he most often does so as if it were an epistemic principle—as if its judicious application could sort belief-worthy from non-belief-worthy theological claims. Moreover, he does this in such a way that it is clear he wants more from it than simple accord with (noncontradiction by) whatever is true of human existence as such. He expects claims passing the test of the credibility criterion to possess at least the following property: they can in principle be verified by an experience that anyone, simply in virtue of being human, could have. Given a theological claim whose belief-worthiness is unclear, Ogden says that we should consult “what any human being can experience and understand.”<sup>20</sup> If such consultation does not contradict the claim, and thereby yields some support for it, then the claim is validated and so is “worthy of being believed.”<sup>21</sup> This way of putting things shows clearly that the credibility criterion functions as an epistemic principle for Ogden.

An example of Ogden's epistemic use of the credibility criterion will be useful here. It will help to show how it works in practice, and so what it really comes to in theory. In his book *Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many?* Ogden provides what he takes to be a refutation of exclusivism in part by using the credibility criterion.<sup>22</sup> Exclusivism is, according to his definition, the view that “Christianity is the only true religion . . . [and] that Christians alone, as participants in this religion through their membership in the visible church, obtain the salvation that God established it to mediate.”<sup>23</sup> The deployment of the credibility criterion against this view is straightforward:

<sup>20</sup> Ogden, *Is There Only One?* p. 37.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> He also uses the appropriateness criterion; for a full refutation both must be deployed. But I shall consider only his use of the credibility criterion, and that only for the kind or style of argument it involves.

<sup>23</sup> Ogden, *Is There Only One?* p. 29. Compare the more expansive definition at pp. 40–43.

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Nothing that even a Christian could experience would warrant holding that the way in which she or he and other Christians have been given the possibility of salvation is the only way in which it has been or can be given. . . . There would be no way, even in principle, of ever verifying it in terms of common human experience and reason, since no human experience could show that God has not given or cannot give the possibility of salvation in some other way.<sup>24</sup>

The credibility criterion, if this example is any guide, seems to require verification by experience. The idea seems to be that no belief ought to be held that cannot be verified (in principle if not in practice) by some specifiable human experience that anyone could (in principle) have. Ogden does not make clear here (or anywhere else that I have come across) just what counts as verification by experience. It is not accidental that he does not, for it turns out to be extremely difficult to do so in any useful way. The following example may help to show why.

What experience does (or could) verify my belief that there are human beings other than myself? Perhaps seeing or talking with what appear to me to be such. But then we have a weak verification criterion, for of course it remains possible that what appear to me to be the humans with whom I converse are figments of my imagination or the product of faulty patterns of neuronal connection. That I take them not to be (and that I am right to do so) is intimately connected with my belief that there are in fact human beings other than myself (just as this belief is intimately connected with its seeming to me that I see and talk with such beings). But if this is what Ogden has in mind, then of course there are many experiences that could verify exclusivism: its seeming to me that I am being told by God that it is true, for instance; or its being taught me by the Church.<sup>25</sup> Here too we have instances of the same logical kind, of a belief that  $p$  (that exclusivism is true) being intimately connected with and complexly supported by an experience (of its seeming to me that God says such and such, or that the Church teaches such and such). If Ogden wants a closer relation between experience and claim than this—perhaps that the experience in question entails the truth of the claim—he will, I think, have to say that beliefs such as *there are human persons other than me* and *the sun will rise tomorrow* (not to mention such interesting cases as the belief *every even number greater than two is expressible as the sum of two primes*) are in just the same epistemic case as he takes exclusivism to be. And this, I take it, is not a desirable conclusion.

Ogden's credibility criterion is, it seems, a universal epistemic principle

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>25</sup> I should perhaps make it clear that I take exclusivism as Ogden defines it to be false, just as he does. But I also take his reasons for so taking it to be entirely the wrong ones, at least so far as the credibility criterion is concerned.

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in at least one of the senses in which Locke's was: it is supposed to control the belief-forming and belief-maintenance practices of all (rational? adult? unimpaired?) humans. It is, in form and function, very like the verification criterion of meaning popular among some anglophone philosophers in midcentury. And, like that criterion, it suffers on its face from the kind of self-referential incoherence already mentioned: it does not appear to meet its own conditions on belief-worthiness. Suppose the principle is: *only those things verified by common human experience and reason are worthy of belief*.<sup>26</sup> This principle is not itself verified by common human experience or reason, and this seems to be at least a strategic disadvantage for those who adhere to it as a universal epistemic principle.

Ogden suggests, then, that the credibility criterion ought to be deployed most generally by consulting what any human being can believe or understand. He also seems to think, not entirely coherently, that consulting the findings of the academic disciplines as practiced by secular intellectuals since the Enlightenment is an instance of such consultation, perhaps even a paradigmatic instance.<sup>27</sup> He says, for example, that what application of the credibility criterion requires of us is "most likely to be discerned through intensive discussion with the best secular knowledge . . . [specifically] that of philosophy and the special sciences as well as the various arts."<sup>28</sup> In the case of claims in historical theology, this means that they must be developed by way of discussion with the "general secular study of the religious and cultural past."<sup>29</sup> This is to suggest that such secular studies abide (or ought abide) by the same epistemic principles as theology. This too is a broadly Lockean view, and it leads ineluctably to judgments of the following sort:

the Enlightenment is to be understood normatively as the consistent affirmation of the unique authority of human reason over all other putative authorities. By *human reason* I mean our capacity not only to make or imply various kinds of claims to validity but also, and above all, to validate critically all such claims as and when they become problematic by appropriate kinds of discourse or argument involving appeal in one way or another to common human experience.<sup>30</sup>

Almost all the hallmarks of appeal to universal epistemic principles are here. Claims must be validated, by which Ogden means (following the legal sense of the term) that their claimants' title to them must be shown

<sup>26</sup> This, effectively, is the formulation in *Point of Christology*, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> I say "not entirely coherently" because in many cases academic findings are of precisely the sort that almost no human being can believe or understand.

<sup>28</sup> Ogden, *On Theology* (n. 16 above), p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> Ogden, "The Enlightenment Is Not Over," in *Knowledge and Belief in America: Enlightenment Traditions and Modern Thought*, ed. William M. Shea and Peter A. Huff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 321–27, at p. 322.

to be good when it is challenged, by the use of argument that appeals, in part at least, to what all humans share. And, most revealingly, *all* claims must be validated in this way (including, presumably, the claim that all claims must be so validated, difficult though it turns out to be to do this). The central problem with validating (in Ogden's sense) this claim about validation procedures when it is challenged (as I am challenging it here) is that either the attempt to validate will deploy the disputed claim or it will not. If it does, then the calling of the claim into question has not been engaged. If it does not, then the claim has been performatively falsified. Either way, the prospects do not look good.

If, then (it would seem to follow for Ogden), you make a claim and, when challenged, either refuse to validate it or attempt to do so and fail, you are thereby failing in your epistemic duties in continuing to believe it—you are, perhaps, substituting adherence to the deliverances of authority for adherence to those of critical reason. The method for validation suggested by Ogden here then has the power of veto (the Lockean and Humean parallels are obvious): it suggests a principle by which the process of forming and ordering beliefs ought always to be governed, everywhere and by all (*semper, ubique, ab omnibus*: here, as is usual, the quest for epistemic principles that can function as first philosophy is a pale and ersatz reflection of properly Christian views about the teachings of the Church), a principle that must be adhered to on pain of such evils as irrationality and unwarranted assertion.

In sum, Ogden thinks that the proper use of the credibility criterion in theology (as everywhere else) requires the application of a doubly universal epistemic principle: one that applies to all claims and all persons. He further thinks that the unfettered use of human reason in the secular academic disciplines is the best available instance of the practical application of such a principle. The proper understanding and use of such a principle will, furthermore, permit a *de jure* ruling on the belief-worthiness of any claim at all, a ruling that is, in the first instance at least, capable of being made without assumptions about the claim's truth. The *de jure* ruling then issues in (or is collapsed into) a *de facto* ruling: if a claim is *de jure* not belief-worthy, for Ogden, this requires (or perhaps just means) that it is *de facto* false.

It is worth noticing how largely innocent of reflexive epistemological awareness Ogden seems to be—and how surprising this is in a man of such obvious and rigorous analytical powers. While he does state epistemic principles, he rarely addresses them critically as such; and he systematically conflates questions about truth with questions about (epistemic) warrant and (argumentative) validation, apparently not seeing that it is both possible and reasonable to distinguish what makes a claim true (its truth conditions) from what makes assent to it reasonable (the conditions

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under which it may warrantably be asserted), and both from the ways in which it may or must be argued for when challenged. In these conflations and confusions he is typical of modern academic Protestant theology; and the roots of such confusions strike deep into the heart of this theology.

Ogden then proposes for theology a form of the verification criterion. It functions for him as a doubly universal epistemic principle: all theological belief is to be fixed and maintained in accord with it. I have already suggested that principles like Ogden's tend to suffer from deep self-referential difficulties, difficulties that issue in the conclusion that if we abide by the principle we ought to jettison it. But Ogden's credibility criterion suffers from another fatal weakness, also one typical of such principles. It assumes the truth of matters upon which it is deployed to rule with the appearance of not having so assumed. Consider the following claim:

The intellectual and moral virtues necessary for understanding and doing what God wants of us are attainable only by submission to what some authority teaches; and the kind of understanding that would make possible the construction of probative and dialectically-efficacious arguments as to just what makes that authority properly authoritative is in principle not available independently of such submission.<sup>31</sup>

This is a complex claim. It is no part of my intention fully to elucidate it, much less to defend it. I want only to indicate that Ogden's credibility criterion assumes it to be false (which is the same as to say that it requires the truth of its contradictory), and that it is only in virtue of such an assumption that the credibility criterion can work. And yet if the criterion is to work as Ogden appears (at times) to want it to work (as a doubly universal epistemic principle), it ought to be able to work independently of assuming the truth of what it wants to show belief-worthy, which in the case here being canvassed is that human reason is a thing of a particular kind. It should be no surprise that the credibility criterion cannot deliver on its promises. It is entirely typical of universal epistemic principles that they cannot.

At this point another possible construal of Ogden's enterprise needs to be addressed. At various points in his corpus he offers what amounts to a transcendental argument whose conclusion is that every token of the type human existence bears certain properties. These properties are variously labeled ("confidence"; "awareness of value"; "trust"; "faith")<sup>32</sup> and it seems that they are not supposed to be phenomenal properties with

<sup>31</sup> I take this to be a broadly Augustinian claim. See, e.g., *De utilitate credendi*.

<sup>32</sup> Ogden's various ways of putting that matter are usefully discussed in Philip E. Devenish and George L. Goodwin, ed., *Witness and Existence: Essays in Honor of Schubert M. Ogden* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 12–14.

specifiable content (like, say, *being appeared to redly*): they produce no *qualia*. They are, rather, *abstracta*, formal properties that are only actual when instantiated together with some phenomenal properties.<sup>33</sup> They are to actual humans much as the property “being one greater than its predecessor” is to each member of the series of whole numbers: every member of the series does and must have this property, but only (and with equal necessity) together with another nonformal property such as “being one greater than four” (in the case of five). The argument whose conclusion is that every token of the type human existence bears these abstract properties is, briefly, that observed facts about human life (thought, action, and so on) require their postulation. This of course means that the phenomenal properties of any particular token of human existence are necessarily compatible with (require the postulation of) the presence of these properties.

Now, suppose that Ogden’s appeal to and use of the credibility criterion is not to be understood as the application of a universal epistemic principle. Suppose instead that it involves appeal to the transcendental argument just mentioned. In that case, a particular claim will be judged worthy of belief only if it is congruent with an understanding of human existence that sees it as intrinsically possessing faith (to use a shorthand form of the conclusion of Ogden’s transcendental argument). If this is the way to understand the credibility criterion, then when Ogden applies it to particular instances of human believing or experiencing we ought to find him showing, or attempting to show, in what sense these instances are or are not congruent with such an understanding of human existence as such. But we find no such thing. We find instead some appeal to possible verification, as in the argument against exclusivism discussed above. I can only conclude that Ogden’s use of the credibility criterion is not to be understood as an appeal to his transcendental argument but rather as the deployment of a universal epistemic principle.

A few comments are in order at this point about the effects of Ogden’s epistemology upon his theology. Briefly, and much too simply, it is obvious that the effects are radical: theology is eviscerated because the epistemic principle that controls it constrains and reshapes it in rather the way that foot binding used to constrain and reshape the feet of aristocratic women in China. The constraint, as might be expected from the nature of the epistemic principle, is in the direction of assimilating theology to what goes on, intellectually speaking, in the academy. In this, once again, Ogden’s work is typical of most contemporary Protestant academic theology. As a result, and to take only the most striking examples, christology

<sup>33</sup> Devenish and Goodwin, p. 36, n. 21, citing Ogden, *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 128, n. 32.

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becomes, in the first instance, a matter of addressing existential questions, which is to say that *Christus in se* is reduced to *Christus pro nobis*.<sup>34</sup> It follows from this that the sacraments of the Church are representative rather than constitutive;<sup>35</sup> that much of the Church's liturgical practice is based on conceptual and attitudinal mistakes of various sorts; that the ecumenical credal formulae, the symbols of the faith, are propositionally false; and that the canon of the Church is not to be identified with the Scripture identified as canonical by the Church, principally because the Church made significant mistakes in the historical judgments it used to delimit the canon.<sup>36</sup> To show that Ogden does think all of these things would require more space than I have at my disposal, and to show that he is wrong in so thinking would require yet more. I want only to indicate that these are the results to be expected from requiring that theological claims pass the test of universal epistemic principles, that they are abundantly evident in Ogden's work, and that they issue principally from confusions about epistemology. They are the death of theology properly understood, the assurance of its pale half existence as a Lockean shadow of the body of Christ, proudly proclaiming its right to exist in the university (a right that should be of scarcely any intrinsic interest to it) instead of speaking the Gospel to the world.

### EPISTEMOLOGY IN THE SERVICE OF THEOLOGY

All that I have argued so far might lead to the conclusion that I take epistemology to be of no significance for theology. But this is not at all the case: I take it to have essential elucidatory and apologetic functions. One of the intellectual needs of the Church has always been to elucidate to herself and to her cultured despisers (among whom in the end Ogden must be numbered, even though he does not so think of himself and even though there is much in his work that indicates a love of the Church) what it is that she takes herself to know and how she takes herself to know it. Any theology that failed to essay this task would fail by misunderstanding its proper scope; any that judged itself to have completed the task would fail by hubris. But neither the elucidatory nor the apologetic aspects of the Church's epistemology should bear much resemblance to Ogden's (or Locke's) proposals.

A typical theological epistemological proposal in elucidatory mode will not try to establish the belief-worthiness of what it recommends independently of assuming its truth; neither will it require for the demonstration

<sup>34</sup> This is argued *in extenso* in *The Point of Christology* (n. 18 above).

<sup>35</sup> This is the implication, e.g., of Ogden's comments on practical theology in *On Theology*, pp. 94–101; and it is explicitly stated in *Is There Only One?* (n. 16 above), pp. 84–99.

<sup>36</sup> For this, see *On Theology*, pp. 45–68, *Point of Christology*, pp. 103–4.

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of what it claims (as both true and belief-worthy) arguments that either do or should convince those who do not already take what it claims to be true. Suppose the Church teaches the following: *everyone ought control their beliefs by what is written in the Bible* (a claim that would need much discussion in order to make it precise). This is a claim that proposes a rule for the proper ordering of belief, and one that presents itself as desirable for all. This means that it is (among other things) an epistemological claim. But its primary purpose is to explain how Christians do (and ought) order their beliefs, not to provide a universal epistemic principle.

A typical theological epistemology in apologetic mode will be a defensive engagement with epistemological proposals that the Church cannot accept. This is what I have been engaged in for most of this essay. Here the goal might be (negatively) to show that the unacceptable epistemological proposal, whatever it is, has no purchase or claim upon the Church, which is to say that Christians need not attempt to order their beliefs in accord with it. Or it might be (positively) to show that the alien epistemological proposal cannot fulfil its own desiderata and is therefore flawed. I have suggested various ways in which this is true of Ogden's proposals. But in neither case will it be to show by arguments which it judges likely to convince all comers that the alien proposal ought to be abandoned in favor of the Christian one. Rather than this, the Church will offer catechesis to those who make such proposals and will pray that they might accept it, for only by proper catechesis (which involves submission to authority) can the intellectual and moral virtues appropriate to understanding of and adherence to a properly Christian epistemology be developed.

Epistemology is then the servant of theology, not its master. This is likely to be disappointing to those, like Ogden, who harbor a nostalgic *Sehnsucht* for the grand epistemologies of the Enlightenment. But nostalgia for confusion should die a quiet death: it is not a pretty thing to defend, and the occasion for the *quietus* of this particular example of it is long past.

A final apologetical move needs to be made here. The attentive reader might think that I am deploying a universal epistemic principle of my own without admitting it: that I am requiring adherence, perhaps, to the claim *people should believe only what is coherent* because I have been objecting to Ogden's proposals in part on the ground that they are not coherent. But this is not (or not quite) right. My main objections to Ogden's proposals have to do, at the highest level of abstraction, with the fact that they cannot fulfill their own desiderata. This is a form of incoherence, but it is in the end a performative one: proponents of conceptual systems that guarantee their own failure to meet their professed goals are like those who profess a desire to be sumo wrestlers but eat as though they want to be gymnasts. Indicating failures of this sort is meant principally to sug-

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gest, with proper humility, that here is an intellectual enterprise that must fail in its own terms, that cannot bring off what it sets out to achieve. It is not meant to appeal to a universal epistemic principle.

In conclusion, when I first came across Ogden's work I knew that it must be mistaken because, in spite of its claims to the contrary, the positions it issued in were unrecognizable to me as Christian ones, and they were indeed largely incompatible with what I took (and take) to be such.<sup>37</sup> I then sought to see just where Ogden had gone wrong (the present essay is part of the result). This order of thought exemplifies what I take to be the proper apologetical function of epistemology in theology, and it is important to mention it because of that. But it also suggests (what is obviously true) that Ogden and I have radically different ideas about what is properly Christian (in Ogden's terms, about what is appropriate to Christian witness), and these I have scarcely addressed in this essay. That is a topic, *Deo volente*, for another occasion.

<sup>37</sup> Ogden is not of course alone among prominent Protestant theologians of his generation in producing a system that bears little resemblance to (what I take to be) orthodox Christianity. Gordon Kaufman's views (to name just one example) are as far (though very differently far) from orthodox Christianity as Ogden's views. By contrast, someone from the same generation for whom this is not true is Wolfhart Pannenberg; this difference is in large part because Pannenberg does not suffer from the epistemological confusions that are apparent in both Ogden and Kaufman.