Introduction

Youth understands immediately that there is a God, because for the young person God’s house is right next to his father’s residence, and it is entirely natural for him to be there. But when one grows older, the way to the church is often very long.

—Søren Kierkegaard

The skeptical spirit of modern criticism has cast suspicion on belief in God. It has eroded confidence in our capacity to know truth and in our ability to produce rational consensus. More fundamentally, it has undermined our trust in the authority of the Christian tradition. This book examines the challenges of scepticism and relativism to religious knowledge after the demise of classical foundationalism. In criticizing responses to these challenges, by Karl Barth and by Reformed epistemology, I hope to reconstruct their insights in a more robust response to scepticism and relativism that does not depend on making excessive claims about our epistemic capacities. The first part of the book examines how the disjunction of objectivism or relativism in philosophy has motivated the search for a more objective perspective in religion and theology to avoid relativism. The second part of the book outlines a hermeneutical model of rationality that involves a more nuanced conception of the relationship between trust, doubt, faith, and reason. This model is used in the last part of the book to develop a Kierkegaardian perspective on religious knowledge, which is illuminated by Wittgenstein’s philosophy,

that stresses the importance of the intellectual and theological virtues in religious knowledge.

One of the themes of the book is that doubt is part of our humanity. Whereas scepticism doubts whether we can know truth, relativism doubts whether we can find a sufficiently objective perspective to adjudicate strong disagreement about truth. Thus, relativism involves scepticism about rationality or our ability to produce rational consensus. Although we cannot prevent these doubts from arising with a philosophical refutation of scepticism, we can learn to live with doubt through faith. Kierkegaard argues that doubt arises from the fundamental structure of human consciousness. Consciousness is a synthesis of the ideal and the real, the logical and the existential. This duality not only makes certainty and doubt possible, but the persistent incommensurability between these two discrete factors makes doubt an inescapable actuality. From this duality, all related dualities arise, including knowledge and its objective reference, truth and error, and faith and doubt. Because of this duality, time and space introduce fragmentariness and incompleteness in human experience. Through reason, we strive to complete the incomplete in a view of life that attains a certain wholeness, however imperfect and limited. That we can never attain this wholeness in actuality, however, is the mark of our finitude which prevents us from achieving the objective certainty we crave. The famous scientist Albert Einstein tells us that this search for meaning and intelligibility originates in a cosmic religious feeling. In this religious experience, “the individual feels the futility of human desires and aims and the sublimity and marvelous order which reveal themselves both in nature and in the world of thought. Individual existence impresses him as a sort of prison and he wants to experience the universe as a single significant whole.”² Similarly, Wittgenstein describes the experience of the world as a limited whole as the mystical. The instinctive search for meaning and intelligibility corresponds to the desire to know, to the desire to transcend the limits of language and thought in order to view the meaning of the world *sub specie aeterni.*³

Thus, the cure for doubt, Kierkegaard tells us, is not more reflection, but an act of faith that moves the personality forward in response to the fundamental human need for meaning and intelligibility. Indeed,

faith is not, nor can it ever be, the necessary outcome of reflection. Rather, it is the necessary presupposition for reflection. Einstein argues that this is as true for the scientist as it is for the believer. Kierkegaard argues that the fundamental human need for meaning and intelligibility identified by Einstein may even lead to the need for God, which is the human being's highest perfection. Without faith, the personality cannot constitute itself, any more than the scientist can discover the secrets of nature. The faith that is born of this human need is always struggling for its existence against objections and challenges, and is made strong through them. Here, as David F. Swenson argues, “strife and struggle, anxiety and hope, fear and trembling, despair and faith, are the disciplinarians that fashion the personality.”4 The decision of faith, therefore, is not a possession that can be objectively guaranteed; it is a subjective certainty that is acquired in patience through a gaining or doing in the face of an objective uncertainty.

In the complete absence of doubt, however, there can be no critical belief and a system of belief, which had been held quite critically for a time, tends to decay into a dogmatically held ideology. In religion and theology, this decay of critical belief is called fideism. Here we need to draw a distinction between appropriate and inappropriate forms of fideism. On one hand, as Michael Polanyi has argued, there can be no knowledge without faith, whether in science or in theology. To illuminate scepticism, on the other hand, we need to understand how ideology and fideism are skeptical attitudes or reactions to difference and diversity that lead to the decay of critical belief and ultimately to insularity. This requires a definition of fideism that is different from the one that has been shaped by the evidentialist model of rational inquiry in science. According to this definition, “a fideist is one who accepts or maintains religious belief in defiance of or contrary to reason. Fideism comes from the Latin fide, which means ‘faith’. A fideist, therefore, affirms that one comes to belief in God as a matter of faith alone. Why is fideism considered odious and worth avoiding? In its antipathy for reason, it neglects or downplays a critical aspect of our nature.”5 This definition of fideism confuses the theological virtue of faith with an epistemic process that concerns whether our beliefs about God have warrant or justification. In contemporary philosophy of religion, faith

is assumed to be an inferior form of knowledge that can be transmuted into a more rational form, perhaps due to the invisible influence of the Enlightenment. This assumption motivates the application of the analytic definition of knowledge, as justified true belief, to faith.

Although the book probes the philosophical and theological details of this confusion, one observation needs to be made at the outset. The ideal that no one be fideistic in the manner they acquire beliefs of maximal concern, such as those found in ethics and religion, is connected to a foundationalist view of rationality. C. Stephen Evans and Merold Westphal rightly suggest that “perhaps Enlightenment critiques of the reasonableness of religious belief point to defects not so much in religious belief as in the conceptions of knowledge uncritically adopted as the basis of these critiques. Maybe religious knowledge looks dubious because we have the wrong idea about what it is to know something and how we know what we know.” 6 Since the prevailing definition of fideism also depends on these conceptions of knowledge, it is not clear why the definition has not come under scrutiny with the conceptions of knowledge uncritically adopted as its basis. Maybe religious knowledge looks dubious because we also have the wrong idea about what it is to trust something and what the role of trust is in knowledge. Whichever definition of fideism we adopt after the demise of the classical picture of knowledge, fideism can no longer be simply defined as accepting religious belief in defiance of or contrary to reason when our very conception of reason has changed in light of fallibilist theories of knowledge.

Recent developments in epistemology, or the theory of knowledge, have questioned whether trust, or for that matter faith, can be defined as accepting belief in defiance of or contrary to reason. Some virtue epistemologists, for example, argue that trust and epistemic authority are normative belief-forming processes that are compatible with modern notions of egalitarianism and autonomy. In particular, trust has a crucial role in epistemic virtue because many of the intellectual virtues are enhancements of trust or restraints on it. 7 This suggests that a more nuanced conception of the relationship between trust, doubt, faith, and reason is needed. This conception, moreover, should include a definition of fideism that is more consistent with recent developments in epistemology. In a conversation about religious belief with M. O’C. Drury,

7. See Zagzebski, Epistemic Authority, chapter 2.
Wittgenstein cautioned his friend that he should never allow himself to become too familiar with holy things. For, as Wittgenstein argues, “the essential fault of what has been called ‘fideism’ is that it dodges all difficulties by adopting a too familiar acquaintance with holy things.” This definition of fideism includes the crucial point of the prevailing definition of adhering to religious belief in defiance of or contrary to reason without confusing this decay of critical belief with faith. Although derived from the Latin root for faith, Wittgenstein suggests that fideism is quite different from faith. Whereas faith refers to a critical mode of acceptance by means of grace, fideism refers to an uncritical adherence to the deposit of faith in which we fail to transmute what is believed or accepted through faith into knowledge through the competent exercise of intellectual and theological virtues.

Wittgenstein argues that the child is naturally fideistic in trusting the veracity of what she is told by adults about the Christian tradition. Similarly, Kierkegaard argues that the child has a natural and immediate relationship with God undisturbed by reflection. But as the child matures in the Christian faith, she cannot remain fideistic about the system of belief she has inherited from the Christian tradition in the face of intellectual challenges. To do so, Kierkegaard argues, is to acquiesce in a state of natural religiousness or childish form of Christian-ity inappropriate for the adult. The notion of the responsible believer dates back to at least Augustine. As Eleonore Stump argues, “Augustine supposed that although we must accept this [Christian] worldview on faith, having accepted it on faith, we investigate it by reason in order to further our comprehension of it, to develop and deepen our grasp of religious truths.” Stump tells us that Anselm of Canterbury codified this epistemic disposition in the watchword, “faith seeking understanding.” In the words of Anselm, “I do not seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this too I believe, that ‘unless I believe, I shall not understand.” Thus, for both Augustine and Anselm, faith is a condition for religious knowledge rather than a form of religious knowledge. In contrast to faith, fideism is the failure to develop a rational faith or reasoned trust concerning the familiar elements of our religious knowledge and experience, in which the believer

10. Anselm, “Proslogion,” 73.
Introduction
dodges all difficulties by adopting a too familiar acquaintance with holy things. Faith, the condition for religious knowledge, should not be confused with fideism, the failure to transmute what is believed or accepted through faith into knowledge. For, as Anselm argues, in questioning what we already know through faith we seek by reasoning to learn what we do not know. This examination does not take place in advance of our acceptance of the deposit of faith, but only after we have already believed it to be true through the inward work of grace.

Although belief in God begins with faith, the responsible believer must reason about the beliefs whose veracity she has trusted in order to know what she believes. Faith seeking understanding requires knowledge. But knowledge requires more than mere true belief. Knowledge requires true belief that has been acquired through the competent exercise of intellectual virtues, in contrast to true belief that has been acquired by luck, or true belief that has been acquired immediately through immersion in the Christian tradition. In reflective knowledge, the exercise of these ground-level competences involves a second-order level competence, namely, determining when it is appropriate to trust or ascent to belief, and when it is appropriate to doubt or withhold belief when there is too much risk of error. In contrast to the excessive claims made about our epistemic capacities by Barth and Reformed epistemology, this view of our epistemic capacities is egalitarian; any normal adult human being can exercise these competences. The view of knowledge as a performance, as a matter of doing something rather than merely believing something, is rooted in the virtue tradition in Plato and Aristotle. Although religious belief may be acquired passively by trusting the authority of the Christian tradition, intellectual virtues such as open-mindedness, intellectual humility, and understanding are needed to transmute religious belief into knowledge. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff have rightly stressed the importance of the intellectual virtues in the Christian life.

Unlike Plantinga, however, Wolterstorff recognizes that religious knowledge requires more than the competent exercise of intellectual virtues. The transmutation of religious belief into knowledge also requires the competent exercise of moral or theological virtues such as faith, patience, and suffering. Indeed, another theme of the book is that the problem of religious knowledge is interconnected not only with the intellectual virtues, but more fundamentally, with the human will and
the theological virtues. For Kierkegaard, faith is at once a theological virtue and an intellectual virtue. Contrary to the characterization of faith as something radically subjective, invidious, and irrational, Kierkegaard argues that faith is a passion that has a dialectical nature. Unlike emotions, which are temporary and come and go, a passion is an emotional disposition that has duration. Thus, we may talk about the endurance of faith. Like other virtues such as courage, patience, or temperance, the believer needs faith not just once, but habitually to cope with what happens in the world. As such, faith is an acquired way of responding or reacting to God, to the world, and to other people without guarantees. Like any emotion, the passion of faith is transitive; its object is knowledge of God.

The dialectical nature of faith comes from its need to constantly mediate two extremes in Christian experience, absolute certainty and skeptical doubt, as it oscillates back and forth between them. Descartes argues that hope and anxiety are opposite, but necessary and complementary, passions of the soul. Whereas hope is convinced that what it desires will come about, anxiety is convinced that what it desires will not be fulfilled. When hope is so strong that it excludes anxiety, its nature changes into confidence or assurance. Conversely, when anxiety is so extreme that it leaves no room for hope, it changes its nature into despair which treats the object of passion as unattainable.\(^{11}\) Thus, hope and anxiety are moderating factors in Christian experience. According to Descartes, this situation may lead to irresolution and inaction. An excess of irresolution results both from too great a desire to do our best in choosing the right and from a weakness of the will. The only cure for this situation, as Kierkegaard argues, is decisiveness. In the decision of faith, the dialectical nature of faith struggles to keep the soul balanced between the extremes of dogmatism and scepticism, by preventing hope from degenerating into dogmatism and by preventing anxiety from degenerating into scepticism. Faith must not only struggle against too little confidence, in which the believer is convinced that the object of her passion is beyond reach. It must also struggle against too much confidence, in which the believer dodges all difficulties by adopting a too familiar acquaintance with holy things.

According to the virtue tradition in ethics, moral and religious language assumes that there is already something there in the personality

of the subject to talk about that needs to be given substance, definition, shape, and structure. Whereas Kierkegaard describes this identity as the self, Wittgenstein describes it as a form of life. In the absence of a constellation of emotions, attitudes, and dispositions in a person that need to be corrected, the beliefs of the Christian tradition have little meaning. Plato and Aristotle understood that we need to learn to make sense with our lives as much as we need to learn to make sense with our thoughts. Paul L. Holmer argues that faith helps us do both. Persons themselves can be deprived of sense. Like thoughts, lives can also be invalid and need justification. In ethics and religion, we see that something besides language can be the bearer of sense, order, significance, and even truth, namely, the human being.¹²

But one must be careful here. Although Christianity assumes that there inheres in the subjectivity of the individual the possibility of its acceptance through faith, it does not assume that faith is a disposition that is already present in the personality. Barth has quite rightly criticized this tendency in liberal theology. The Christian identity, which is essentially characterized by faith, is not something that is ready-made. Rather, it is something that we have to make ourselves through the competent exercise of both the intellectual and theological virtues. When faith is included in the familiar elements of our religious knowledge or experience, one must be careful not to misrepresent faith as a disposition that already inheres in the subjectivity of the individual, independently of free will and moral virtue. One must also be careful not to misrepresent faith as an immediate disposition undisturbed by reflection, by situating it so deeply in our noetic structure that doubt cannot get at it there. Here, like Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard cautions that “anything offered as a belief, even if religious, which keeps the dialectical away, which stops doubt and inquiry, which causes the uncertain to appear certain, is a superstition, be it offered with religious purpose or not.”¹³
