



Robert Prevost

# Athens Meets Jerusalem: Revelation for Philosophers

Robert Prevost

**THE AGNOSTIC INQUIRER: Revelation from a Philosophical Standpoint** by Sandra Menssen and Thomas D. Sullivan. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007. 331 pages. Paperback; \$35.00. ISBN: 9780802803948.

**CROSSING THE THRESHOLD OF DIVINE REVELATION** by William J. Abraham. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006. 198 pages. Paperback; \$20.00. ISBN: 9780802829580.

Modern audiences typically understand revelation as a category for theology, not philosophy. These authors challenge this assumption. Sandra Menssen and Thomas D. Sullivan provide a straightforward defense of using revelation to defend belief in God’s existence. William J. Abraham, working more specifically in the area of epistemology, defends the role of revelation as a basic source of knowledge. I will look first at Menssen’s and Sullivan’s contribution and then to Abraham’s. Finally, I will make a few evaluative comments on these works.

## Targeting the “Tacit Assumption” of Philosophy

Menssen and Sullivan specifically target what they call the “tacit assumption” of philosophy, namely, that one must show that God exists before one can ask whether God has revealed. They understand revelation in a straightforward sense:

We understand a revelatory claim to be any claim, written or spoken, that fits—or can be made to fit—the logical form:

g revealed to r that p

where g is a supernatural or entirely nonphysical being, a god, let us say; r, the recipient, is an individual or a group of individuals; and p is a propositional content (possibly a very complex, even infinite, content) (p. 69).

The tacit assumption is that a claim to have received a revelation can be evaluated only after the existence of God has been proved. In opposition to the tacit assumption, they make the following claim: If it is not highly unlikely that God exists, then it is reasonable to examine particular claims to revelation from God as evidence for God’s existence. It is not highly unlikely that God exists; therefore, it is reasonable to examine particular revelation claims as evidence for God’s existence. More boldly, they contend that if the existence of God is not highly unlikely, then a reasonable inquirer must actually examine a number of revelation claims before a judgment can be made that God does not exist.

*Menssen and Sullivan provide a straightforward defense of using revelation to defend belief in God’s existence. Abraham, working more specifically in the area of epistemology, defends the role of revelation as a basic source of knowledge.*

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The book is essentially an extended defense of this argument. It does not itself, for the most part, conduct the investigation into any particular revelation claims; it defends the necessity of doing so before one can reasonably conclude God does not exist.

Menssen and Sullivan divide their book into two parts. In the first part, they make their central case. Consider, they say, the proposal that a single person named Homer was responsible for the *Iliad*. In the course of history, many have rejected that possibility because it was believed that no preliterate person, such as Homer, could have composed such a work. Given the complexity and length of the poem, the argument reasoned, a single individual could have produced it only if that person had the capacity to write. If it were impossible for a preliterate person to produce the poem, no amount of contrary evidence internal to the poem would raise the likelihood that a single person produced it. In other words, the probability of an impossibility is zero and any evidence added to an impossibility does not improve the odds.

Suppose, however, that it were possible for a single individual, in a preliterate context, to produce such a long and complex poem. The probabilities change, and evidence for authorship does matter. Once such a possibility is recognized, then internal evidence derived from the content of the poem itself becomes relevant for judgments about authorship.

Menssen and Sullivan take revelation claims to be closely analogous to arguments about the production of the *Iliad*. If the possibility of God's existence were nil, or next to nil, then no appeal to the internal content of revelation could support belief in the existence of God. On the other hand, if it is not highly unlikely that God exists, then just as it is relevant to look at the content of the *Iliad* to determine authorship, so is it reasonable to look at revelation claims for evidence of God's existence.

Integral to the argument in this first part is their contention that the existence of a world creator is not highly unlikely. Their argument is a simple one: if the universe came into being, then there is a significant probability that there is a world creator. Science shows that the universe had a beginning; therefore, there is a significant probability that there is a world creator. Here they respond to a host of

traditional objections to natural theology based on the notion of causation, such as that the universe might have come into existence uncaused or that an immaterial cause (such as a god) could not have caused the existence of a material universe.

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It is helpful to remember that Menssen and Sullivan are not concerned to show that the fact that the world had a beginning proves the existence of God, something akin to the *kalam* argument. Their purpose goes only so far as to show that there is reason to believe that the existence of a world creator is not highly unlikely. Their concluding section to this argument is particularly interesting in this regard. Titled "The Quiet Concessions of Atheists," this section examines remarks by three prominent atheists, Quentin Smith, Richard Dawkins, and Antony Flew, to the effect that there are reasons to think that a world creator exists.

Menssen and Sullivan devote the second part of the book to discussing four general objections to their argument. The first objection is a version of the problem of evil: Given the magnitude of evil in the world, it is highly implausible that a creator of this world would be good; it is, therefore, highly implausible that an appeal to revelation will show that a good god exists. Though Menssen and Sullivan do not believe that an adequate response to the problem of evil can be given without appeals to revelation, they believe it is also possible to discuss a priori, if you will, in a very general way what a world creator's character would be like. In this context, they discuss a host of traditional topics, such as Hume's suggestion that evil in creation points to an evil creator, the problem of construing evil as a means to another end, and the problem of determining how much evil a good god would allow.

The second objection contests the possibility of evaluating revelation claims. The argument is that no plausible philosophical method exists that would enable us to evaluate revelation claims, so the attempt to do so is futile. Here Menssen and Sullivan enter into an extended discussion of "inference to

the best explanation." In my judgment, this discussion is among their most important contributions.

Many others have suggested that Christian theism is best understood as a large-scale explanation of some kind. Drawing upon the most recent discussions of best-explanation arguments, Menssen and Sullivan give a more detailed account of how this might be. Three aspects of their treatment are particularly helpful. First, they recognize the role of an "organizing framework" for dealing with a large set of diverse data. They do not say it this way directly, but this seems one way in which a large-scale theory explains: by providing an organizing framework that accounts for the existing data and provides an intelligible narrative for new data.

Second, inevitably, evaluation of explanations will involve subjectivity. Menssen and Sullivan speak of the "ineliminable subject." Here one is reminded of Basil Mitchell's description of the role of judgment in his *Justification of Religious Belief*.<sup>1</sup> I am not sure that this is as problematic as Menssen and Sullivan take it to be. By way of preempting the discussion below, I would suggest that the alleged problem of subjectivity is a holdover of a discredited approach to epistemology, namely, epistemic methodism. Rational inquiry by its nature works, broadly speaking, inductively where no formal calculus exists for evaluating the weight of evidence.

Third, Menssen and Sullivan recognize the specific problem of using controversial data as the basis for an inference to the best explanation. One could hold that such explanations have weight only when the data to be explained are evident to all. Menssen and Sullivan argue that a theory can have real explanatory power, even if the data explained are *putative* facts. Putative facts are quasi-facts that "fall short of being 'observations' or 'givens'" (p. 208). Menssen and Sullivan call the kind of putative facts important for their case "Conditional Upon Explanation" facts, or CUE-facts for short. Explanations often both identify facts not otherwise known and explain their existence at the same time. If the explanation did not stipulate the fact, the fact would not be known; and at the same time the evidence for the fact is its explanation. The point is that there is nothing problematic for explanations involving CUE-facts.

The third objection to their central argument follows on the second by way of suggesting that

religious explanations of putative revelation claims are never good ones; hence, even if God's existence is not impossible, there will be no reason to appeal to God's existence as an explanation for the content of any particular revelation claim. Science, history, psychology, and other nonreligious perspectives will simply provide better explanations for any putative claim to revelation.

In responding to this objection, Menssen and Sullivan come as close as they ever do to making a substantive argument for the truth of Christian revelation. They point out that religious explanations can be very powerful. They illustrate their claim using two political values: political equality, on the one hand, and human rights, on the other. As they describe these values, "humans are all in some sense basically equal, and all humans have certain inalienable rights" (p. 251). Menssen and Sullivan draw attention to the importance of these two concepts for liberal societies, despite the fact that they are not evident in the same way as, say, the computer in front of me is. How then can the reality of political equality and human rights be defended? Menssen and Sullivan believe that they are best described and defended as CUE-facts, facts conditional upon being explained. Reasonably defending human equality and human rights as facts depends crucially upon having a reasonable explanation of those putative facts. Moreover, drawing upon recent work, such as Jeremy Waldron's *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations in Locke's Political Thought*, they argue that the only reasonable explanation of those facts derives from the content of Christian revelation, particularly the Christian focus on the *imago Dei*.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, human rights and equality are evidence for the truth of Christianity. This supports their claim that religious explanations can be good ones.

A final objection is that religion is about faith, and faith requires resolute belief that goes beyond the evidence. For that reason, the appeal to revelation understood as a rational claim is undermined. This is an ethics of belief issue: one ought to proportion one's belief to the evidence, and because faith requires one to go beyond the evidence, it is always wrong to have faith. Menssen and Sullivan address this objection by a two-fold response. First, they note the importance of context to the proportionality requirement itself. Sometimes, one's belief must go beyond the evidence. One may have a duty to



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hold a belief “fixed” despite the available evidence at the moment. For example, they claim, the available evidence may point to the guilt of a close friend, but we have a duty for the sake of our friendship to deny guilt and to hold resolutely to belief in the friend’s innocence, at least over the short haul. Second, they argue that faith fits the pattern of contexts where belief must be resolutely maintained in the face of counter evidence. In that fashion, they argue that resolute belief is not incompatible with a proper understanding of proportional belief.

### Revelation’s Epistemic Status within Christian Theism

William J. Abraham examines a different, though obviously related, aspect of revelation: its epistemic status within Christian theism. This issue is a particularly complex one for Abraham for two reasons. First, as part of a larger project defending what Abraham calls “canonical theism,” he distinguishes epistemology from canon.<sup>3</sup> Canonical theism, according to Abraham, is

the version of theism embodied in the canonical heritage of the church, [which is] a network of materials, practices, and persons brought into being by God within the Church and intended to heal our wounded and rebellious selves (pp. 15–6).

Canon, on this view, is more than the Bible alone. It extends to the church, the creeds, the liturgy, to the sacrament and even to the identification of saints. Crucially important is Abraham’s claim that the Christian canon exists as a means of grace, which enables corrupt human creation to enter into friendship with God. For Abraham, canon is not an epistemological category.<sup>4</sup>

Since the thirteenth century, western antagonists, for various historical and theological reasons, attempted to make particular epistemologies definitive for Christian theology.<sup>5</sup> By Abraham’s lights, this has been a disaster because it subjects the canonical faith to the vicissitudes of the particular epistemology “canonized.” Consequently, the church’s missteps in epistemology have left it vulnerable to attack on the reasonableness of its canonical doctrine, which is, as Abraham describes it, essentially a “rich vision of God, creation, and redemption” (p. 15).

The second reason for the complexity of the issue of revelation’s epistemic status concerns the nature of epistemology itself. To be clear, Abraham affirms the value of epistemological inquiry in theology. Epistemology is concerned primarily with standards of rationality, justification, and knowledge. Abraham believes that the canonical theist is rational, is justified in believing the defining doctrine of canonical theism, such as Trinitarianism, and knows that these doctrines are true (p. 5). By separating canon from epistemology, he is not negating the value of epistemology for Christian theology. Rather, he objects to a particular construal of epistemology that has dominated the western philosophical tradition for centuries, if not millennia. The problem is, as I understand Abraham’s view, if one gets epistemology wrong, then one will be, in principle, incapable of adequately understanding, much less evaluating, the rationality and justification of canonical theism.

Abraham’s work can and should be seen as a contribution to recent discussions of epistemology initiated by Alvin Plantinga’s articulation of a Reformed epistemology.<sup>6</sup> Abraham enthusiastically endorses its attack on evidentialism; and, to a large degree, Abraham’s argument in this book is possible because of the critical work of Reformed epistemology, and of others to be sure, forcing a rethinking of epistemology. Nonetheless, he believes it fails to account fully for the rationality of Christian belief and doctrine.

As Abraham understands the claims of Reformed epistemology, the rationality of Christian doctrine such as Trinitarianism is

secured by the proper functioning of the *sensus divinitatis* implanted within us at creation by God and repaired in redemption by the work of the Holy Spirit (p. 47).

This reliance on the *sensus divinitatis* for epistemic warrant is problematic for several reasons. First, it ignores history. The doctrine of the Trinity developed from the church’s struggle with soteriology and its vision of the human condition. Second, the appeal to the *sensus divinitatis* itself involves a complex set of theological commitments regarding anthropology, soteriology, and pneumatology. It is not evident why one theological doctrine, e.g., the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, should be epistemically privileged over the doctrine of the Trinity.

More work needs to be done. Finally, it seems odd to rely on the *sensus divinitatis* for warrant to the exclusion of other reliable epistemic practices, such as perception, memory, reason, and the testimony of the church and the biblical writers.

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The interplay of these two themes sets the stage for Abraham's project in this book. In order to avoid the problems that come with canonizing an epistemology and to assess accurately the rationality of Christian theism, epistemology itself must be reconceived. Once that is accomplished, Abraham can mine the canonical heritage of the church itself for resources of epistemic warrant for its claims, particularly its commitment to divine revelation.

At this point, I will register the limitations of this review. If one is familiar with Abraham's previous work, one understands that he is marvelously adept at "thinking outside the box" in creative and insightful ways. This book is no exception. It is absolutely chock-full of nuanced analysis, drawing connections with unexpected issues and developing arguments in unexpected ways. It would be impossible for me to detail this in any significant degree. What I will do here is to relate what I think to be the main themes of the book as Abraham develops them.

In the first three chapters of the book, Abraham discusses epistemology proper. Abraham begins by criticizing what he calls the "standard strategy" in epistemology, which is, first, to work out a general theory of rationality and justification and then, second, to examine how well theism does or does not satisfy the general theory. As he states it, this view "leaves theology at the mercy of the prevailing options in contemporary philosophy" (p. 9).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, according to Abraham, it ignores the many epistemic suggestive elements of Christian theism and assumes that Christian theism is in some way epistemically deficient.

Abraham argues that the "standard strategy" is a form of epistemic methodism.<sup>7</sup> Briefly stated, epistemic methodism identifies a particular method for justification and requires all rational belief to be justified according to that method. Descartes, it is often said, represents the paradigmatic epistemic methodist. Another example, I would suggest, is the contemporary bias toward scientific method. Read anything by Richard Dawkins.

Epistemic methodism, however, has its problems. Any claim to have identified the proper method must itself satisfy its own requirements. This has been notoriously difficult to do, and epistemic methodism ends up hoisted on its own petard! As Plantinga has famously argued regarding one kind of epistemic methodism, strong foundationalism, restricting the proper foundations of knowledge to a particular kind of belief, such as propositions evident to the mind or to the senses, cannot be justified by an appeal to propositions evident to the mind or to the senses.

The alternative is epistemic particularism. Epistemic particularism does not begin with method, but with actual knowledge. As Abraham states it, the problem for particularism is not how little we know, but how much we know (p. 34). One could not even begin to detail all that which we obviously know: "Today is a warm day in September," "Today's sermon was unusually long," and on and on. The task for epistemology is to illuminate the knowledge we already possess, to clarify crucial epistemic concepts, and to render our common practices intelligible.

It is hard to overestimate the significance of adopting particularism over methodism. First, it makes irrelevant certain kinds of questions about the relationship of our best epistemic practices to truth. The history of epistemology has, in part, been a reaction to the skeptic's challenge: how can our best epistemic practices guarantee the truth of our beliefs? The argument is that, unless that guarantee is there, we cannot claim to know anything. This question troubles epistemic methodists, but not epistemic particularists. Since particularism starts with knowledge, it is simply a non-issue.

Second, and maybe more importantly, particularism inevitably broadens what can be considered legitimate standards of rationality, justification, and

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knowledge. This, I think, is the point of Plantinga's discussion of the "Great Pumpkin" objection, and it applies here.<sup>8</sup> That objection challenges Reformed epistemology to provide some basis for properly distinguishing basic from nonbasic beliefs. As Plantinga notes, to do this, we must proceed inductively. By examining a stock set of examples of recognized knowledge, we can identify features that are epistemically important.

The necessity of proceeding inductively is the key. Because this is not epistemic methodism, one cannot eliminate a priori, as it were, suggested examples of recognized knowledge. But this is where it gets problematic: How do you choose the stock set of examples? Christians will have one set and non-Christians another. Though these may overlap at points, many choices will be controversial. Nonetheless, controversy does not detract from their appropriateness.

What emerges from particularism is what Abraham describes as a conception of "epistemic fit" (p. 29). There will be many competing claims to knowledge, and we cannot expect those claims to satisfy a single method. Rather, because we proceed inductively, we must allow each respective side to make the kind of argument that is appropriate, or fitting, for its proposal. Abraham notes,

[I]n the end each network of beliefs must be taken in its radical particularity. The fit between the claims advanced and the positive intellectual case made may be singular and unique. We are thus entitled to work our way outward from within the theism on offer, take seriously the kind of epistemic suggestions advanced by the ordinary believer and in the canonical heritage of the church, and see where this takes us in the discussion (p. 45).

In the balance of the book, Abraham develops the "epistemic suggestions" of canonical theism that ground the rationality of the canonical theist and that justify accepting canonical doctrine. Canonical theism is "constituted by a network of interrelated propositions that need to be taken as a whole." (p. 43). This network involves many diverse components, including an ontology, a metaphysic, a vision of life's meaning, a historical narrative, a morality. It also, for Abraham's purposes, includes a rich tapestry of epistemic categories. Abraham states, "Of all the epistemic suggestions that lie buried

in the canonical heritage of the church, this is the single most important component" (pp. 56-7).

Though the canonical heritage, for Abraham, as noted above, is primarily a means of grace by which God heals human nature, nonetheless, it makes claims about God and his activity in history. The issue of divine revelation, then, arises naturally from the fundamental commitments of canonical theism. Divine revelation, for Abraham, is the central "stock example," if you will, of recognized knowledge within canonical theism, and his task will be to clarify, and make intelligible, its epistemic role.

In chapter four, Abraham initiates his discussion of the epistemic character of revelation and introduces the *oculus contemplationis*, the capacity of human beings for immediate awareness of God. Revelation is essentially about disclosure (p. 84). Abraham makes the analogy to ordinary contexts of human interaction: As human persons reveal themselves to others by what they say and what they do, so God reveals himself in word and action in history, and chiefly in the Incarnation and the events of redemption. God does this in manifold and diverse ways; hence, Abraham describes revelation as "polymorphous." He concludes:

A Christian account of divine revelation will gather up all that God has done to reveal himself to the world and relate it in rich and various ways both to the means of grace that transmit divine revelation and to the tasks and projects of ecclesial and everyday existence (p. 65).

The epistemic import of revelation is dependent upon the human capacity to discern it. Here Abraham draws upon another element of the canonical heritage, the notion that one has immediate, non-inferential awareness of "the reality of God in our inner experience and in our encountering the world" (p. 66). Abraham calls this capacity the *oculus contemplationis*.

This capacity, Abraham believes, is basic, comparable to other basic cognitive capacities. Our perceptual capacities, for instance, are basic cognitive acts through which we develop true beliefs. Another instance of this class of basic acts is our ability to recognize other human agents as agents and not as automatons. This latter capacity is very important because it serves as the analogue to our capacity to recognize God's revelation. In each case, these capacities produce warranted, non-inferential be-



liefs. In the case of the *oculus contemplationis*, the capacity produces beliefs about the reality of God and the presence of divine revelation.

It is important to highlight the role the *oculus contemplationis* plays for Abraham. He locates it within a perspective of basic capacities that shifts the burden of proof to one who would challenge its product. In a footnote, Abraham draws attention to the role of the principle of initial credulity in the work of Richard Swinburne.<sup>9</sup> The idea is that absent a reason to doubt our basic epistemic capacities, things are likely to be as our basic capacities show them to be. So it is with the *oculus contemplationis*.

The default position is this: in the absence of good arguments to the contrary, we recognize straight off God's general revelatory activity in the world and within ourselves (p. 67).

As a consequence, Abraham affirms with Reformed epistemology that our knowledge of God will not generally be based on evidence. We do not hypothesize the existence of God to explain data supplied by our other basic cognitive powers. Our ability to recognize God is a basic cognitive capacity.

Abraham's next task is two-fold. First, he wants to show how the *oculus contemplationis* and revelation might illuminate nontheological knowledge of the world, or as he says it, whether it "can then be found to cohere with other things we find out about the world." This will be important for Abraham for two related reasons. On the one hand, it will be important for his defense of the epistemic value of revelation that it not conflict with other recognized sources of basic knowledge; on the other hand, he must not repeat the mistake of Reformed epistemology by making other recognized sources of basic knowledge irrelevant to the development of Christian doctrine. Second, he wants to show how this epistemic category helps account more adequately for the development of canonical doctrine and, in particular, the doctrine of the Trinity.

In chapter five, Abraham introduces the idea of the "threshold" of revelation (p. 85). The metaphor of threshold is spatial or geographical, and it conveys the notion of a complete alteration of perspective as the result of crossing the threshold. Abraham's point is that once one has received revelation, it is a life- and world-changing event. He identifies four features of this altered perspective:

First, it is often the result of a dramatic conversion; second, the disclosure contained in the revelation has to be received as knowledge, not opinion; third, it evokes a response of allegiance, requiring a "response of loyalty, trust, and persistence"; and fourth, revelation will necessarily illuminate every aspect of one's existence (p. 87).

Abraham discusses at various points how crossing the threshold of divine revelation enhances our trust and understanding of our cognitive capacities.<sup>10</sup> In one particularly interesting illustration of this, he cites the example of Descartes who used the existence of God to establish the reliability of our ordinary cognitive capacities. This makes perfect sense from the standpoint of one who has crossed the threshold of divine revelation. Abraham describes it as a "loop-back effect leading to a reconceiving of the cognitive capacities that brought one to divine revelation in the first place" (p. 88).

In chapter six, Abraham utilizes the notion of "crossing the threshold of revelation" to deliver an epistemology of theology, an account of the epistemic role of revelation in the development of doctrine. Over time, God's revelation constantly alters and enriches our understanding of God. God reveals himself in and through the creation of the nation of Israel with all its practices of devotion and worship, its style of leadership, and its rich canon of Scripture. Most importantly, it is the impact of revelation on that community that enables the community to recognize and receive the revelation of God through Christ, which is again completely world-altering. In response to that revelation, the community of Jesus develops its own practices of devotion and worship, styles of leadership, and a rich canon of Scripture.

It was in this context that the foundational Christian dogmas such as the doctrine of the Trinity arose. Abraham describes it this way:

[T]he doctrine of the Trinity arose over time out of the deep interaction of the special revelation of God in Israel, the extraspecial revelation of God in Jesus Christ, experience of God in the Holy Spirit, and sanctified creative imagination and reason. It is radically incomplete and inadequate to trace the kind of revolutionary change in the doctrine of God represented by the Nicene Creed merely to the divine revelation enshrined in scripture (p. 106).

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It is instructive to contrast this understanding of the epistemic ground of canonical doctrine with that suggested by Reformed epistemology's use of the *sensus divinitatis*. In Abraham's view, the development of doctrine requires a historical sequence of revelation, crossing a threshold, assimilating and deepening one's understanding of God, then more revelation, crossing another threshold, further assimilation of the content of revelation, and so on. What we have as the canonical doctrine develops out of God's disclosure of himself in revelation and its impact on the lives of the recipients of that disclosure, all the time aided and directed by the Holy Spirit. Revelation is indispensable in this process. By Abraham's lights, it would be radically incomplete and inadequate to describe our knowledge of God as Triune as a basic belief.

To this point, Abraham has argued for an epistemology of the theology of canonical theism that he believes frees it from its "captivity to restrictive and disputed epistemological theory" (p. 114). The entire canonical heritage, on this view, mediates God's self-disclosure, not just scripture. Now he returns to an earlier theme of demonstrating the coherence of revelation with other modes of basic cognitive practices. He addresses a number of topics here. In chapter seven, he examines more thoroughly the impact of revelation on one's understanding of basic cognitive capacities and on one's interpretation of evidence and counter-evidence. He notes a number of important effects of revelation, including, among others, a more robust appreciation of one's ordinary cognitive capacities such as perception, a greater confidence in the recipient's sense of God's presence in his or her life, and, my favorite, a greater appreciation for "the inner logic of the ontological argument."

In chapter eight, Abraham addresses the obvious existence of counter-narratives. After a very nuanced account of various levels of belief and unbelief, he discusses the possibility of true loss of faith. Revelation does not insulate the believer from criticism. Given the context of modernity, there will always be someone who offers a counter-narrative to explain the experience of the believer who has received alleged revelation. As one can step across the threshold of revelation, so one can step back across the threshold, reinterpreting one's experience in a decidedly non-Christian way.

This reality leads Abraham in chapter nine to a more formal discussion of the possibility of epistemic defeaters and objections to his proposal. Abraham is quick to admit the possibility that evidence will present itself that can defeat the claims of Christian theism, and he discusses the kinds of evidence that would tell against it. However, he rejects the claims of what he calls "global defeaters": first, that conflicting claims to revelation cancel one another out; or, second, that claims to revelation can be generally rejected because they are often motivated by evil purposes. Here he returns to his epistemic particularism. There is no substitute for examining particular claims of particular religious traditions. The arguments of one tradition will not be the arguments for another. He concludes, "Relevant defeaters and objections against this or that particular claim must be laid out and argued in detail" (p. 154).

In the final chapter, Abraham returns to the issues of rationality, justification, and knowledge. Drawing upon recent work in virtue epistemology, Abraham argues that rationality is first and foremost a character trait, one which is more or less embodied in individuals. Christians, according to Abraham, will exhibit the same degrees of rationality and reasonableness as non-Christians. Most importantly, according to Abraham, absent relevant defeaters, there is no reason to doubt the full rationality of the mature Christian believer.

Indeed, he concludes, the mature Christian believer has grounds for claiming to know that Christianity is true. Revelation secures the doctrine. In an earlier section of the book, Abraham illustrates the way this would proceed:

When called upon to explain why we think the creed is true, we can and should appeal to the place of divine revelation in Israel and in Jesus. However, we should also draw attention to the place of religious experience, to the use of sanctified imagination and reason, and to the promise of God to grant the Holy Spirit to the church and lead it into the truth. We should without apology and embarrassment display our reliance on the *oculus contemplationis* as a bedrock capacity given us in creation to perceive the truth about God (p. 111).

Abraham's point is that this can give a justification for a mature Christian's belief. And again, absent



relevant defeaters, this secures knowledge for the canonical theist. Given the nature of God, if God reveals, what he reveals will be as secure epistemically as any other knowledge claim.

## Evaluation and Recommendations

For those particularly interested in a philosophical evaluation of revelation, I recommend both volumes highly. Menssen's and Sullivan's book is, in a way, the less ambitious of the two. It has a very narrow focus, the defense of a single conditional, but covers the ground very thoroughly, amazingly so. In fact, because of its organization, clarity, and breadth, it could be used as a textbook for an undergraduate class in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion.

Abraham's book, on the other hand, will be less useful for a typical undergraduate, though immensely interesting to graduate students and professionals in the field. Its argument is extremely complex and assumes more on the part of the reader's background knowledge. If I have a complaint, it is that Abraham tries to do too much in too few pages. Nonetheless, it is a highly original piece and deserves serious study by philosophers and theologians alike. Abraham offers, almost uniquely in my view, an example of how epistemology must be done "after methodism." Through the extensive use of "narrative with epistemic commentary," he offers fitting examples of the epistemic practices of canonical theism, which center around the reception of revelation. He then carefully delineates how defeaters and objections can be raised against his particular epistemology of theology, and invites critical reflection on his suggestions.

How can we relate these two books? Obviously, both are concerned with the philosophical analysis of issues relating to revelation. However, there is an interesting tension between the two books. Menssen and Sullivan explicitly construe revelatory claims as explanations to be evaluated in part by their explanatory power, while Abraham wants to take revelation claims as analogous to perceptual claims, veridical until proven guilty. Menssen and Sullivan suggest, insofar as their task is an apologetic one, a common frame of epistemic reference between theists and agnostics, while Abraham suggests a certain kind of incommensurability between rival versions of theism and atheism reminiscent of MacIntyre's tradition-based conception of rationality.<sup>11</sup>

One way to resolve the tension is to recognize that Menssen and Sullivan speak to a different audience from Abraham. To use Abraham's terminology, Menssen and Sullivan address those who have not crossed the threshold of revelation. For those who have crossed the threshold of divine revelation, who stand within canonical theism, who understand what the *oculus contemplationis* is and know of no successful defeaters, they are justified in claiming that they know that God exists. But what of those outside canonical theism? They, the "agnostic inquirers" as Menssen and Sullivan describe them, want to know whether canonical theism is true. An appeal to the *oculus contemplationis* will be unhelpful because the debate is precisely over the reality of the capacity.

I suggest, *contra* the protestations of Abraham and Reformed epistemology, that in this context, the conception of theism as an explanatory theory is helpful. Abraham goes to great lengths explaining the defeasibility of canonical theism's claims to revelation. He writes:


Claims to divine revelation can be undermined and falsified; they can be subjected to strain; they can be overturned by a review of the status of our cognitive capacities; they can be challenged by the undercutting of the evidence advanced in their favor, or by new evidence (p. 143).

Note, though, that this kind of challenge will not follow a formal calculus. One can only look at data and the proposed explanation and make a considered judgment on the weight of the particular claims. In other words, the process will be dialectical, where part of the judgment is over which rival best accounts for experience.<sup>12</sup> It is not infelicitous to describe this "accounts for" as an argument to the best explanation.

For this reason, Menssen and Sullivan provide support for a rational defense of canonical theism in at least two ways. First, their discussion of CUE-facts mitigates any appearance of arbitrariness of the canonical theism's central epistemic commitments. Remember that they argue that "conditional-upon-explanation" facts are neither unusual nor problematic as part of "inference to the best explanation" arguments. From this perspective, the *oculus contemplationis* and revelation would be "putative" facts, CUE-facts. Moreover, their discus-

# Essay Book Review

## Athens Meets Jerusalem: Revelation for Philosophers

sion of the specific ways that religious explanations can be good ones hints at the way canonical theism can be defended against the counternarratives that seek to pull the canonical theist back over the threshold of revelation. 

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>B. G. Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973).

<sup>2</sup>Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations in Locke's Political Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup>William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology from the Fathers to Feminism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). Abraham distinguishes canonical theism from other manifestations of Christian theism, evangelicalism, classic Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, precisely on this issue of epistemology.

<sup>4</sup>I should note here that in this review, I sometimes use the terms "Christian theism" and "canonical theism" interchangeably. Though the substantive doctrinal differences between canonical theism and other forms of Christian theism are real and important, I am not sure that much hangs on making those distinctions here. What is important is Abraham's suggestion that no particular epistemology has been, or should be, canonized such that it becomes part of the rule of faith.

<sup>5</sup>Abraham contends that both the papal claim to infallibility and the Reformer's attachment to *sola Scriptura* illustrate

attempts to make a particular epistemology definitive for theology.

<sup>6</sup>See Plantinga's seminal "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 16–93.

<sup>7</sup>For background on the distinction between epistemic methodism and epistemic particularism, see Roderick Chisholm, *The Problem of the Criterion* (Marquette, WI: Marquette University Press, 1973), or the last chapter in his *Theory of Knowledge*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977).

<sup>8</sup>Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 74–8.

<sup>9</sup>Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), chapter 13.

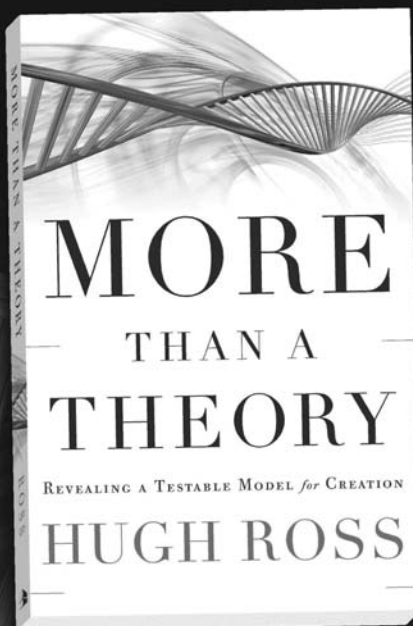
<sup>10</sup>See particularly, Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology*, chapter seven.

<sup>11</sup>See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

<sup>12</sup>Over the years, J. R. Lucas has developed the logic of dialectical argument more thoroughly than most others. See J. R. Lucas's on-line book, *Reason and Reality* [<http://users.ox.ac.uk/~jrlucas/reasreal/chap0.pdf>]. Lucas was a particularist before particularism was cool. He criticizes epistemic methodism from a position distinctly different from that of Reformed epistemology, and he draws out, accurately I think, the consequences of epistemic particularism for metaphysics.

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