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Theology and the problem of expertise

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Abstract
Despite the ubiquitous role of expertise in matters of knowledge, its importance is contested in much of Christian theological scholarship, especially the Protestant kind. This article seeks briefly to describe the history of Christian skepticism towards expertise, discuss its theological basis, and argue that we need to acknowledge the importance of expertise in our theologies. Recognizing the role and validity of expertise, I argue, helps one to articulate a middle ground that can affirm the distinctiveness of Christian thinking about the world while also moderating the mistrust that many laypersons have towards intellectual authority.

Keywords
expertise, skepticism, Enlightenment, anti-intellectualism, authority

Introduction

Knowledge and authority are typically believed to be mutually exclusive; if you have one then you do not need the other. Many persons in contemporary culture believe that a precondition for the flourishing of knowledge is intellectual freedom, the ability to discern the truth for one's self without coercion from others. Immanuel Kant thus argued that the Enlightenment ethos could be expressed with the phrase, "Have the courage to use your *own* understanding."[1]

This article will discuss a different sort of authority: cognitive authority, or to be clear, expertise. We believe a whole host of things based on someone else's testimony. Such truths cannot be established by an individual's own reason but can only be obtained by the testimony of others.[2] It is a form of authority because

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1. Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?," *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California, 1996 [1784]), 58 (emphasis in original).
2. Steven Shapin, "Here and Everywhere: Sociology of Scientific Knowledge," *Annual Review of Sociology* 21(1995): 302.

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choosing whom to trust bestows them with a power to shape the world you inhabit: what the universe is like, what actions are morally correct, what one should live for, and so forth. Our knowledge of the world is directly tied to what we know about other people.

Despite the ubiquitous role of expertise in matters of knowledge, its importance is contested in much of Christian theological scholarship, especially the Protestant kind. The anti-intellectualism of conservative evangelicalism may be interpreted as anti-expertise-ism, revealed most clearly in debates over global warming and intelligent design. To give a recent example, a young-earth-creationist dentist on the Texas Board of Education, who helped insert controversial additions to school textbooks, recently spoke of his being able to "stand up to the experts" on evolution and other topics.[3] Such views are also evident in more sophisticated theologies. John Milbank says a key theme of Radical Orthodoxy is calling into question the idea that other disciplines have their own area of expertise to which theology can be brought into dialogue.[4] The common element in Christian skepticism towards expertise is the belief that creation cannot be properly understood apart from the insights of revelation.

This article seeks to briefly describe the history of Christian skepticism towards expertise, discuss its theological basis, and argue that we need to acknowledge the importance of expertise in our theologies. Recognizing the role and validity of expertise, I argue, helps one to articulate a middle ground that can affirm the distinctiveness of Christian thinking about the world while also moderating the mistrust that many laypersons have towards intellectual authority. Without such a plausible theological middle ground, Christian communities will continue to complicate efforts to address global challenges such as climate change.

Theological sources of skepticism

First, a brief discussion on the theme of skepticism towards expertise in church history before moving to contemporary Christianity. Skepticism about worldly wisdom is a potent motif in Christian history and is found in the New Testament itself. The apostle Paul, for example, argues in first Corinthians (1:20–21), "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" Taken on its own, this verse suggests that secular knowledge is an invalid category because philosophers lack divinely aided insight into the nature of reality. This New Testament theme about not trusting worldly wisdom reoccurs often in Christian history, as exemplified by the famous question posed by Tertullian around the beginning of the third century: "What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?"

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3. Russell Shorto, "How Christian Were the Founders?," *New York Times Magazine*, February 14, 2010, accessed September 16, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2010/02/14/magazine/14texbooks-t.html.

4. Rupert Shortt, "Radical Orthodoxy: A Conversation," *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, ed. John Milbank and Simon Oliver (London: Routledge, 2009), 30.

(or Christian doctrine with classical philosophy?). Pagan philosophy was seen as an unhelpful distraction from divinely revealed knowledge and encouraged the vice of curiosity, which had such tragic results for the occupants of the Garden of Eden.[5]

Nevertheless, the Christian tradition has had a more ambivalent attitude towards classical learning in its early and middle periods. Classical learning was often found to be a helpful way to articulate doctrine and to explain Christian theology to educated pagans. Though one sees in the history of Christian theology some alterations between positive and negative estimations of classical learning, in general it was seen as something to be esteemed rather than rejected. By the end of the patristic period, especially in the work of Augustine, Christianity was presented as the culmination of philosophy, the final answer to the philosophical questions asked by the ancients.[6] Along the same lines, the Christianized Aristotelianism of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century demonstrated the inherent complementariness of theological and natural-philosophical reason.

The most significant shift against classical learning came in the Reformation. Luther insisted that the "vain philosophy" against which Paul had warned was the Aristotelian philosophy that had shaped the Christian worldview of the medieval period. The Roman Catholic Church, Luther said, has become the "Church of Aristotle," which was not intended as a compliment because God had sent Aristotle "as a plague upon us for our sins."[7] But he went beyond asserting the shallowness of pagan philosophy; he also asserted that lay believers could, as a result of God's grace, access the meaning of biblical interpretations more clearly than their priests. The learning of the ecclesiastical authorities had warped their judgments, limiting their understanding of the clear meaning of Scripture. Luther thus turned the classical theme of mistrusting worldly wisdom against experts of the Church. The Protestant doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture made one's personal interpretation of Scripture more important, at least in practice, than those of the pope and church councils.

Individualism in American evangelicalism

After briefly discussing some historical background to the problem of expertise as it relates to the Christian tradition, I will now describe the theological epistemology that makes expertise so problematic for many modern Christians. I will refer here specifically to the individualistic tendencies that are found in American evangelicalism, though I do not mean to suggest that all evangelicals are guilty of it, or that non-evangelicals are blameless.

5. Peter Harrison, "Curiosity, Forbidden Knowledge, and the Reformation of Natural Philosophy in Early Modern England," *Isis* 92.2 (2001): 267.

6. Stephen Gaukroger, *The Emergence of a Scientific Culture: Science and the Shaping of Modernity, 1210–1685* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006), 50.

7. Peter Harrison, "Philosophy and the Crisis of Religion," *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2007), 236.

One popular way to understand the origin of modern Christian skepticism towards expertise is through Alasdair MacIntyre's analysis of the Enlightenment. For MacIntyre, a defining characteristic of moderns is a belief in the universality of rationality—that all rational persons conceptualize data in one and the same way—which in turn blinds moderns to the way their views are conditioned by particular communities and contexts.[8] An overly optimistic view of human reason creates a supreme confidence in one's own cognitive abilities, ironically lessening one's estimation of the accuracy of the beliefs of others. Applying this analysis to Christianity, the problem is that too many Christians are Cartesian rationalists who think that if they could somehow forget all the things they have been taught and deduce their own conclusions from uncontaminated premises, they could establish the true meaning of Scripture.

I doubt that MacIntyre's analysis of the failures of the "Enlightenment project" always maps neatly onto debates within Christian theology. While the Enlightenment has undoubtedly influenced Christians, it seems a different—though perhaps related—issue underlies the distinctive nature of much of Protestant Christianity. The issue is not that of universal reason, but epistemic transformation. Whereas someone like Thomas Aquinas had affirmed the existence of the "natural light" of reason after the Fall, Protestants believed that human faculties were completely corrupted after original sin.[9] Consequently, universal reason only existed in a world without original sin; only Adam's faculty of mind was in such a state to see the world truly. In the words of the seventeenth-century English churchman Robert South, Adam was "ignorant of nothing but of sin."[10] But in the fallen world in which we live, the Bible and even nature can only be seen properly by those vivified by the Spirit, those who now have the "eyes to see." Thus, when theologians influenced by MacIntyre object to the Enlightenment view of reason, they do so by endorsing a basic principle of Protestant epistemology: the world looks different for those who believe in Jesus Christ. The real issues are: To what extent does becoming a Christian restore human noetic abilities? And how much should one trust in the corruptible judgment of others when one is indwelt by the Spirit?

The typical way that American evangelicals answer these questions reveals a deep hostility to the role of expertise. This hostility is embedded in its prevailing theological epistemology, what one might call "enlightened common sense." It is "enlightened" because one has all that is needed to understand the Bible if indwelt by the Spirit. Most American evangelicals do not typically believe that they have the Bible completely figured out because one can never completely eliminate the noetic effects of sin. But they typically believe that if we are to gain either certainty

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8. Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1990), 16.

9. Harrison, "Philosophy and the Crisis of Religion," 239.

10. Peter Harrison, "Original Sin and the Problem of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63.2 (2002): 241.

about the Bible's divine origin or its essential message, it is a gift bestowed though the Holy Spirit to those who believe in Jesus Christ.

It is "common sense" because it prefers doctrines that are self-evident and down-to-earth, unlike theologians whose judgments are corrupted by their learning.[11] From this perspective, whenever people try to set themselves, or their teachings, as mediators between Scripture and the believer, Christianity will become corrupted. American Evangelicalism tends to be a populist form of Christianity, led by those without formal training in divinity schools and who believe, as a result, that they are in a better position to grasp God's truth.

For those who accept the "enlightened common sense" position, the solution to every theological controversy is to strip away the accretions of theological tradition and let the Bible speak for itself. There should be, in other words, "no creed but the Bible." To admit the role of creeds in the Christian faith is to say that the Bible is in some way unclear, making the mistaken assumption that the biblical message needs to be restated and clarified so that others could grasp it.[12] The perfect realization of the low-church ideal is the putting of Bibles in hotel rooms across America as a missionary strategy; the isolated traveler, removed from his or her normal community, is primed to have one's own Augustinian "take and read" moment.

To sum up thus far: many Christians, especially American evangelicals, are shaped by traditions and a theological epistemology that predispose them to mistrust the testimony of others, especially experts. Reliance upon expertise may not only lead you into error, it perhaps can endanger your soul.

Redeeming expertise

In the remaining part of the article, I will argue that a generalized skepticism towards experts overreaches and is untenable, for expertise plays an uneliminative role in modern human societies and Christian communities.

To begin with an obvious point, the downside of an individualistic approach to knowledge is revealed in the fractious nature of Protestant Christianity. The emphasis on the public nature of the meaning of Scripture has not resulted in consensus about Christian theology or practice, but rather has led to the fragmentation of Protestant Christianity into a myriad of pieces. One always has grounds to distrust conclusions that differ from one's own because one's interpretation of Scripture is not to be mediated through others. As with all Protestant groups that try to live by Scripture alone, questions will always exist about how narrowly to define the clear meaning of Scripture and, more importantly, who gets to define what the clear meaning is.

A second reason for rejecting skepticism towards expertise is that it assumes an implausible conception of epistemic transformation. If one's spiritual eyes have

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11. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale, 1989), 80.

12. Ibid., 179.

been opened to see Scripture as authoritative, then no necessary doctrine will remain obscure. This idea lies behind the quarrelsomeness of the fundamentalist; if for some reason you had trouble perceiving the message of Scripture, one should doubt whether you are truly saved since it is only veiled to those who are perishing.

But just as one's moral capacities are not instantly transformed by the indwelling of the Spirit, so too are one's noetic capacities not immediately transfigured. Indeed, there are good reasons to reject the modern assumption that the two can be disentangled so neatly. This point can be seen clearly with regard to the topic of understanding Scripture, which is for evangelicals the final authority for thought and practice. The best image to govern our relationship to Scripture is that of a disciple, where one subordinates personal desire through obedience to a teacher for the purpose of transformation.[13] Just as Jesus gathered around him a community of followers in order to lead them to a fuller understanding of the truth, so too should epistemic transformation be seen as an ongoing process in the Christian life, not an event that has happened in the past. The analogy of discipleship suggests that reading Scripture is a difficult thing to do well, and cannot be accomplished without the inculcation of virtues such as humility, truthfulness, and charity. If discipleship is required to understand Scripture, then we have no reason to suspect that knowledge of other aspects of the world can come quickly or easily.

A third reason for rejecting expertise-skepticism is that the "enlightened common sense" view underappreciates the epistemic abilities of non-Christians, for in practice Christians operate on the basis of secular experts all the time. Imagine the consequences for society if we chose not to act on medical advice or our mechanic's advice because of a general skepticism towards others' opinions. Moreover, we try to find the very best surgeons, mechanics, and so forth, without inquiring about their religious beliefs. This hesitancy to inquire about a person's religious affiliation is not simply a product of the belief that religion is a private affair, but also indicates that religious adherence is not a reliable marker of competency for many kinds of knowledge.

This same point applies to controversies between Christianity and science. Just as Christian presuppositions should play no role in assessing the knowledge of plumbers or electricians, so too many types of sciences can progress regardless of the religious beliefs of their practitioner. Some sciences give us reliable knowledge of the way the world is, independently of whether their conclusions are reached by those holding to the Christian worldview. Indeed, it is part of the profundity of science that, in many cases, it is able to generate consensus from persons of widely divergent backgrounds. Perhaps consensus is only possible over a small range of human experience, but it is significant nevertheless.

Of course, this does not mean Christians must accept all that goes under the name of science, even those with exemplary achievements. Much of the most exact and compelling science occurs in the artificial conditions of the

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13. Markus N.A. Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 91.

laboratory, making it an open question as to its implications and applications to the outside world.[14] Being an expert in the pharmacological mechanisms of a particular drug, for example, does not make one an expert as to whether it should be applied to the general population, not least because it will involve value judgments as to whether the benefits are worth the costs.[15] The complications are even higher when scientific expertise impinges on areas to which theological expertise might contribute, such as in the area of psychology. The larger the scope of a person's claim to knowledge, the more likely it will infringe on the Christian church's own domain of knowledge. Nevertheless, theological viewpoints that have a low estimation of expertise will have a hard time reconciling themselves to scientific knowledge.

A final reason for accepting the importance of expertise is that it provides a better understanding of what actually happens in Christian communities. Individualist epistemologies mistakenly assume a viewpoint of epistemic egalitarianism, that all members of the community are logically competent and that there are no significant limits on each one's ability to investigate questions.[16] But attention to real communities shows that this is hardly the case, for a vast majority of Christians have lacked basic literacy, as well as extensive knowledge of Scripture. It has even become something of a genre in evangelical literature to lament the lack of theological knowledge in their communities.[17] The source of the lament is regularly born out in surveys, such as a recent Pew poll, which showed that three out of ten evangelicals could not name all four gospels.[18] Recognizing the role of expertise provides an explanation for theological illiteracy: beyond the theological essentials, most laypersons rest content knowing with whom proper knowledge can be found, rather than having to try to appropriate such knowledge for themselves. The pastor might be consulted should the need arise, but beyond the bare minimum, knowledge of doctrine is not essential for the Christian faith.

For another example, consider again conflicts between science and Christianity. A large number of Christians are willing to doubt evolution or global warming because they have not personally seen the evidence for it. Yet most of the lay public has never actually read a book for or against evolutionary theory or global warming. Their beliefs are formed based on the opinions of highly influential persons in

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14. Nancy Cartwright and Robin Le Poidevin, "Fables and Models," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 65 (1991): 66.

15. Robert Veatch, "Consensus of Expertise: The Role of Consensus of Experts in Formulating Public Policy and Estimating Facts," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 16 (1991): 430.

16. Alvin I. Goldman, "Experts: Which Ones Should You Trust?," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63.1 (2001): 85.

17. Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994); Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to Do about It* (Grand Rapids, MI: Hourglass Books, 1994).

18. "U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey," *Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life*, 2010.

their lives. Even if one could somehow restrict one's daily interactions to Christians alone, it would not obviate the problem of expertise.

To summarize this section, the role of expertise, like that of power or authority more generally, cannot be eliminated from human societies, but can only be managed in helpful or unhelpful ways. A generalized skepticism towards expertise thus overreaches and may have dangerous consequences. By rejecting individualistic approaches to knowledge and emphasizing the role of expertise, we draw attention to the crucial point that certain persons should be recognized as having authoritative judgments on particular subjects. For most laypersons, the relevant question is not whether a particular scientific theory aligns with one's own everyday understanding of the world, but rather who is competent to offer legitimate scientific opinions.

Theological importance of expertise

In conclusion, I have given an overview of the problem of expertise, why some Christians do not trust experts, and why the anti-expertise position is untenable. Despite the complexities of the issue, it is important for theologians to rehabilitate the category of expertise when trying to account for the way the world is. Individualistic accounts of knowledge ought to be suspicious to Christians for a simple reason: in order for people to trust in God, it requires them also to trust in other people. Whether it is through the witness of another person or parent, or through the reading of the Scriptures, one could scarcely become a Christian without believing in the testimony of other believers. Trust in other persons is a crucial component of Christianity. Once this is acknowledged, issues of expertise arise because one must determine which persons are in a position to make competent judgments, which is why pastors and theologians pay large sums of money to be credentialed by schools and universities. By undermining trust in the value of knowledge obtained from other people and portraying mental and spiritual growth in individualistic terms, Christians are discrediting a key mechanism for the survival of Christianity.

Unfortunately, as I have already discussed, what makes issues of expertise problematic is that outsiders are unable to judge adequately what is being claimed, and there are too many claims of expertise to trust them all. What is required, therefore, is for Christians to be critically engaged with modern thought in a responsible way; not too quick to dismiss modern thought as "secularist" and not too quick to relinquish the accumulated theological wisdom of the Christian tradition. In other words, Christians must be "faithfully present," as James Davidson Hunter has argued, in the disciplines of the modern university.[19] If Christians ignore what these types of expert communities have discovered about the world, they do so at their own peril. Unless the church can bring itself to trust in the best

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19. James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford, 2010), 266.

knowledge of the modern world, the modern world will have little reason to trust in return.

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