Reasonable Belief?
Providing some of the groundwork for an effective Christian apologetic

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Introduction

In his 2009 Gifford lectures, Professor Alister McGrath presents a very strong case for a new 'natural theology.' This is one which does not tread the tired and defunct path of Paley (and some of his modern ID counterparts) by deducing God's existence from nature, but rather one which opens up an exciting and promising apologetic front in which it is maintained that the Trinitarian Christian faith provides the best 'conceptual map' which gives meaning and unity to what we observe of the universe, not least its 'anthropic' nature.

This 'best fit' approach in apologetics is one which not only has great potential in the area of science and religion, but other areas as well- morality, anthropology and the plurality of faiths to name but three. This paper seeks to lay out some of the basic pre-requisites of understanding for Christians in order to sharpen and develop this method of evangelistic engagement. This will mean spending some time in the area of philosophy which concerns itself with matters of knowledge and belief known as 'epistemology'.

Definitions

The term 'epistemology' is derived from the Greek *episteme*=knowledge. It is traditionally defined as the study of the possibility of knowledge and the nature of knowledge, i.e. how can we know and what is the nature of what we claim to know.

First, let us consider some related terms, namely, 'faith'—'certainty' and 'truth'. 'Faith' can be used in a variety of senses. 'I have "faith" in my doctor'—meaning I trust him. There is thus an 'internal element', a disposition of trust, but also an external element too in relating to a particular person who is the object of that trust. This is not to be groundless—there are 'reasons' for faith. In the case of my doctor, it is that he is licensed to practice and has 'proved' himself a good doctor on several occasions to myself personally as well as to many others. When transferred to the religious sphere, 'faith' in terms of trust is no different.

What differs is the *object* of faith—God in Jesus Christ. Here a distinction can be made between 'belief *in*' (trust) and 'belief *that*' (assenting to certain things being true which form the basis for trust). Classically this distinction has been denoted by the use of two Latin terms *fiducia* and *assentus*. Here we may speak of 'my faith' and *the* Christian faith—which refers to a body of belief expressed in propositional form. If one really believes that certain things are true, then it should follow that one will act accordingly (herein lies the difference between 'live faith' and 'dead faith' to use the terminology of the apostle James).

But what of 'certainty' and 'knowledge'? It is possible to be certain and not know and know and not be certain. For example, suppose I said I was certain that the hole in the Ozone layer was caused by the launching of satellites? I was told that this was so by my father and grew up believing this, certain it was so. Later I am convinced by people bringing to my attention certain evidences which showed it was not so. Can I still say, 'I was certain?' Yes, for I was. Can I say, 'I knew?' No, because I was wrong. I can say 'I *thought* I knew.' To speak of certainty is a statement about my psychological state, to speak of knowledge is making a statement about a certain item external to myself (even though it might be about myself, e.g. my psychological state!—e.g. I know I am afraid).

When a person says, 'I believe in Jesus Christ' it means (a) they are claiming certain things to be true about him and his relation to a whole set of other connecting beliefs and (b) they are trusting in him with their whole person. They may say, 'I am certain this is true,' which increases the degree of trust. This is a possible position to be in involving no contradiction. This also allows for growth in trust, knowledge and certainty.

When we come to the idea of 'truth', Anthony Thiselton states that, 'In the case of the history of philosophical thought and even ordinary language no single uniform concept of truth exists.' It is what is technically known as a 'polymorphous' concept, the sense in which a thing is 'true' will depend upon the context and function. Surveying the Bible he shows that there are at least six different senses of the word.

1. That which corresponds with the facts of the matter (Gen. 42:16—Joseph seeks to establish that his brothers have told the truth).
2. Truth=faithfulness/reliability (*emet*)—2 Kings 22:7 the collectors of Josiah's

have acted honestly.

3. Corresponds with the gospel—in contrast with false gospels Galatians 2:5—'knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim 2:4).
4. Genuine or real as opposed to counterfeit—Jesus is the true vine (John 15:1).
5. Contrast to what is hidden—John 8:44 the devil is a deceiver and has no truth in him. The Spirit of truth exposes what is the case.
6. The term can be an over-arching one which covers the above. In the fourth Gospel Jesus *is* the truth, his testimony is valid, he reveals the truth of the gospel, his words correspond with his deeds and his statements with the facts.

Whatever variations and differences in nuances there are depending upon the context,—there is an underlying unity, a family resemblance regarding the different senses of truth: to say something is true carries with it at least the implicit claim that what is being proposed conforms to reality.

How we go about establishing 'what is true' (or its opposite, what is false) will vary according to the context and the nature of what is being investigated. There is, for example, the level of formal logic. The statement 'All bachelors are male' is definitionally true. This is an *analytical statement*—the definition of bachelorhood entails the notion of maleness—to deny the latter would be a logical contradiction. Of course, to assert it is simple tautology. To consider the truthfulness of the statement 'It is raining' involves a different approach. This statement is not *necessarily* true, its validity is dependent upon the confluence of certain facts, it is contingent on a certain state of affairs existing—namely, that precipitation is occurring at the time the statement is being uttered. This is known as a *synthetic statement*.

But consider a different statement altogether: 'My wife loves me.' This is not merely a description of the speaker's state of mind, it is a claim to a state of affairs as objectively being the case. Upon what grounds does the husband make that claim? He may do so unreflectively ('I just know'), but if pushed further and asked to give *reasons* why he knows then presumably it will not be to a single item of evidence to which he will point ('She serves me eggs in bed for breakfast'), but an accumulation of evidences—displays of loving actions, faithfulness, verbal assurances, as well as a whole range of things which are 'tacit'—things which are not hard evidences at all, but more akin to intuition. Someone might want to tighten up this approach by introducing the *principle of falsification* and ask,

'What circumstances would count against such an assertion?' What about failing to cook an egg for breakfast? This would hardly count. But what if she walked out on the husband? That might not be decisive either because she may be doing this to get the husband's attention because he has been so preoccupied with work recently, in which case her leaving him may count as further evidence of her love.

The point being made is that when it comes to personal relationships what is determined to be true and so constituting real knowledge is often a complex and subtle business. There is no one knock down criterion which can be employed. So if we think of language as being an interconnecting network with truth claims being aligned along a spectrum—you have those of a formal analytical nature at one end, those open to empirical sense verification at the other and most others somewhere in between with their truth value being ascertained by a mixture of reason, observation, intuition (insight), *received tradition* and inference. A good deal of what we know is not obtained directly at all, but is simply received from others—by a teacher, reading a book, surfing the internet. By personal observation and my own reasoning alone I do not know the earth to be round. I have been taught that by people I trust, I have seen photographs (although in principle they could be fake, but then again, it is not reasonable to assume that there is an international conspiracy on this matter). Most of what we know falls in this category—received tradition or learning. What's important is the *nature* of what is being claimed and the *reliability* of the people making the claim. So, if a claim is made which is of a common occurrence and those making it are sane and reliable people, we usually have no reason to doubt them. If the claim is common but the people are unreliable we might hesitate before believing them. If, however, the claim is extraordinary and yet the people are reliable we may take a good deal of convincing. What is more, when dealing with *persons* there will always be an element of 'hiddeness' or opaqueness, knowledge of a person is never going to be exhaustive for two reasons: 1 Complete exhaustive knowledge is not available to us as fallen human beings (we are limited by our finitude and our sin, a point taken up below) and secondly for *trust* to be exercised which is essential for human-to-human and human to God relationships—a degree of opacity must exist. This has significant bearing when we come to consider truth claims regarding the Christian faith.

What makes a belief silly? People may be sincere and there may be a degree of 'intersubjective' support. What is the difference between a group's claim that fairies exist and that of Christian's claim that, 'man has an immortal soul?'

Here we come to what many consider to lie at the heart of the subject of epistemology, namely, how we justify believing some things and not others such that we can claim certain beliefs to constitute knowledge. What warrant can be provided for the assertions that are made so that we can be sure that we have not changed our minds irrationally or believe irresponsibly?

Sceptism

Before we turn to look at this question in more detail, let us take a little excursus and consider the position of sceptism. At its simplest and most extreme this is the claim that nothing can be known by us. This can take many forms. It was around in ancient Greece long before Christianity came onto the scene and enjoyed a revival during the time of the Reformation. There are certain brands of postmodernism which are modifications of this—afor example in the writings of Stanley Fish, who would claim that all knowledge is restricted to particular interpretive communities, such that there is a 'black' reading of a text, a 'feminist' reading of a text and so on. Thus what is 'known' will vary depending upon the particular group to which you belong. In extreme radical hermeneutics there is a denial that the text refers to anything beyond itself—this is the deconstruction of Derrida—words refer to other words in a complex system of signs. What can we say in response?

First, that some sceptics themselves are sceptical of sceptism! To claim 'we cannot know anything' is itself a dogmatic assertion—a definite claim is being made. If we can know nothing, how can we dogmatically claim we know nothing? We know something, namely we know nothing! It is self-defeating or to use the technical jargon, it is self-referentially incoherent. Admittedly this is something of an *ad hominem* argument, but one which has force and which applies to all who are sceptical about absolute truth. To claim that all truth is relative is to make at least one absolute truth claim in which case the branch upon which the relativist is sitting has been sawn off. The post-modern critic who denies meaning in the text is at claiming at that least there is meaning in *his* text which he would be correct to believe and wrong to deny. In this one case the claim is being made that there is such a thing as authorial intention, so why not extend the possibility to other texts? To claim that all truth claims are nothing but social constructs means that this claim is *also* a social construct and so can presumably be ignored. The verification principle of the logical positivists such as A.J. Ayer maintained that all statements must be empirically

verified; metaphysical and religious statements could not and so were rendered meaningless. The problem was that the verification principle could not be verified and so was rendered meaningless by its own criterion! This was later openly admitted by Ayer in conversation with philosopher Bryan Magee who stated regarding logical positivism: 'It must have had real defects. What do you now, in retrospect, think the main ones were?' to which Ayer replied, 'I suppose the most important defect was that nearly all of it was false.'

The fact is people do not *function* as sceptics. Even though the belief that 'nothing can be known' may seem so appealing in a pluralist culture, it breaks down not only at the level of logic but practicalities too. A distinction may be made between 'fact' and 'value' so that to claim 'The Second World War ended in 1945' and 'Child torture is morally wrong' do not occupy the same categories, that does not mean that one is less 'real' or less 'true' than the other. In most people's minds the evil of child torture is just a true as the ending of World War II. Sure, there are no doubt those who think it is not and take delight in such activity, but they are considered 'deranged' as there may be the 'odd' person who believes the Second World War is still going (shell shocked veterans for example). To deny the existence of objective universal moral values is not a sign of 'having come of age' ethically because moral relativism is superior to moral absolutism, rather it is a sign of corruption. It is counterintuitive. There is such a thing as moral knowledge as well as historical knowledge, the difference in part lies in how we acquire such knowledge and the sphere of reality in which they operate. This is how Pascal in his *Pensees* describes the condition of the sceptic 'What shall a man do in such a state of affairs? Will he doubt everything? Will he doubt whether he is awake when someone pinches him or burns him? Will he indeed doubt that he is doubting? Will he doubt that he exists? It is impossible to go on like this, and so I maintain that an absolute sceptic has never existed. For nature backs up helpless reason and stops it from going wildly off centre.'

Justification of Belief

When Christians speak of people having 'a belief' they are generally not thinking of a speculative idea, 'Fred believes it will rain tomorrow', or one item of belief 'Bill believes in the efficacy of prayer'. It is more like what can be called an 'interpretive framework' or 'Faith system' or even 'World view' (Weltenschaung). But how do you decide between competing worldviews or belief systems? How

does one decide whether one's own beliefs are warranted? This raises the issue of criteria. David L. Wolfe helpfully analyses this question. He asks how does one assess whether any task has been successfully completed? The answer will be to consider what is expected to be achieved by the assignment and compare it with what has actually been done. For example, if you have been given an essay to write, 'Examine the role of justification in the thought of Martin Luther', you will not only read Luther and specifically what he wrote on the subject of justification and how it related to other areas of his thinking, you will also want additional information or criteria to help you complete the assignment- how many words, deadline, which books to read and so on. In other words, the criteria are not arbitrarily *imposed* on the project they are *constitutive of* the project.

What, then, of a belief system? What sort of project is this? It is a general theoretical project. That doesn't mean it will not have practical implications or considerations. Wolfe defines this as 'The production of a system of assertions which makes sense out of total experience.' That is what beliefs seek to do, to make sense out of life in general (and an individual's life in particular) in terms of attempting to answer the big four questions we considered in chapter 1: (i) Where do I come from?—the question of origins; (ii) Who am I? The question of significance; (iii) Why is the world in such a mess? The question of evil; and (iv) Is there a future? The question of purpose.

Some of these beliefs have been clearly and extensively articulated and formally constitute a 'faith'—Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Humanism, etc. (with all sorts of variations within each set). Other people hold beliefs without much reflective thought but which can still be given some label because when analysed certain features occur which can be associated with a more readily articulated world view—for example, World View surveys conducted many on British University campuses show many students coming out as 'hedonistic existentialists', although most haven't a clue what that means. Nonetheless, the values they hold, and their perception of what would constitute the answers to the Big Four would broadly place them in this category.

If this is the nature of beliefs then there are criteria which are constitutive of the beliefs themselves to which one can appeal to ascertain whether one is warranted in believing what is held and for deciding on one belief over and against another. These criteria are trans-systemic and are imbedded in all systems of

belief committed to the project of 'making sense out of total experience'. These criteria are the six 'C's: consistency, coherence, comprehensiveness, congruence, competitiveness and commitment.

1. **Consistency—**that the assertions don't contradict each other. This is a negative criterion.
2. **Coherence—**it hangs together in such a way that the different elements support one another providing a coherent whole.
3. **Comprehensiveness—**the belief must, in the words of one Gestalt therapist, 'gobble up experience' that is, cover reality and not leave out the rough edges of human experience—e.g. the problem of suffering which Christian science considers to be illusory, a product of the 'mortal mind.'
4. **Congruence—**that is fit reality and so provides a conceptual map which accounts for and to a certain degree *explains* what we experience. In other words it has explanatory power. For example, why we feel significant and yet still longing for more. The question of significance is one which atheism is hard pressed to answer.
5. **Competitive—**a worldview must effectively compete with and be capable of refuting other worldviews. The law of non-contradiction—that something cannot be A and non-A at the same time applies *between* worldviews and not just *within* them. This is vital when tackling the question of religious pluralism.
6. **Commitment—**people need to follow the conceptual map or world view. Any air brained belief can be argued, but not every belief can be lived.

It is one thing to argue for a belief system it is another to live it out. The apologist Ravi Zacharias has said that when he began his work in the 1970's it could be said that people were often won over by the integrity of the *message*. Now people are more aware of the integrity of the *messenger.* When people see the marrying of belief with behaviour then they will be more likely to listen and the behaviour lends credibility and weight to the belief.

The Christian claim is that the Bible as a whole provides such a map, and of course much, much, more, as it is the means whereby we are addressed by the Creator himself and so are encountered by him in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, if this map is true, then all other maps will be faulty and inadequate, some more than others.

Of course, when someone is examining the Christian faith or is young in the faith, the degree to which each one of these components is developed will vary. Explanations and evidences which satisfy one person may not satisfy another. Also, as a person looks into a faith different elements will be grasped in different ways and by and large there will not be one feature which will impress a person and elicit both *assentus* and *fiducia*, the process is often cumulative. Here is Stephen Williams:

> What many people have, when they think about it, amounts to an overall impression: the fact of a material world; the elements of order in it; the religious experience of mankind; the mysteries of conscience; the phenomenon of Jesus Christ and perhaps even the puzzles of the ontological argument—together suggest God to us. We do not make a logical deduction about each item, but a kind of judgement about the whole, though we shall probably give more weight to some things than to others. Our reason is fully involved in that judgement. Our judgement is formed on the basis of pondering different ways of explaining the world, morality or religion, and is formed as we try and think through the implications of these things. However, it is not really a formal and logical deduction.

This is, in effect, the approach advocated by Douglas Groothuis in commending the Christian faith in a post-modern setting. He lists nine points which constitute a Christian apologetic when dealing specifically with postmodernism- but in principle they could also apply to the old fashioned modernist or Muslim.

1. The postmodernist worldview collapses in on itself. If everything is a social construct so is postmodernism and has no unconditional claim to my assent. It saws off the branch upon which it is sitting.
2. The universe is contingent and a designed system best explained by a non-contingent Creator (Acts 7:25). The argument from intelligent design is not yet dead.
3. The only basis for objective moral law is the existence of an objective moral law-giver. You cannot derive what ought to be done from what is the case. Neither is it mere personal preference, it certainly doesn't feel like that and people do not live as if that were the case.
4. The Christian worldview best explains the human condition as that of 'deposed roylalty' (Pascal). Woven into the human character is both dignity and depravity.
5. The various kinds of spiritual experiences of a personal and moral God

as recorded in the Bible cannot be explained away as being mythical or delusional. There is a strong element of continuity between them and a moral transformation which is more than psychological.

6. Christianity makes a whole host of historical claims, culminating in the report that Jesus rose from the dead. A careful study will show these claims to be cogent and coherent. In principle Christianity is falsifiable (1 Cor. 15:13ff).
7. Given his incomparable claims and credentials, Jesus identity is best explained by the historic claim that he was God incarnate. Other explanations prove inadequate (e.g., that he is a sage or a delusional). Here unbelievers are to be challenged to expose themselves to the Gospel narratives. Here we encounter part of God's meta-narrative, but also see within it our own as we can identify with many of the characters and conditions Jesus encounters and so can be addressed by that living Word today.
8. We should make clear that Christianity is a high stakes situation which calls us to act accordingly: it is a matter of heaven and hell. It is neither a game nor a matter of mere taste. A universal truth claim is being made and that should be presented clearly. We are to take God seriously as he takes us seriously.
9. The Christian life centred on Jesus Christ provides the most compelling and engaging meaning for life available. The combination of biblical realism and hope promote both personal and social integrity—providing *reasons* as well as resources for behaving Christianly.

What Groothuis suggests is very much in line with what we spoke of earlier in terms of the fulfilling certain criteria of the interpretive scheme under consideration, touching upon coherence, consistency, comprehensiveness, congruence, competitiveness and commitment. We should positively invite people to test the truth claims of the Christian faith and compare it to others—this is more or less explicit in what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 about the gospel and the place of the resurrection. There the Apostle appeals to the test of consistency—to deny the resurrection is to deny the gospel and you can't have the one without the other. He is also open to falsification: 'If Christ has not been raised your faith is futile.'

'Disposition' and the Holy Spirit

To offset any impression given that one can simply argue people into the Kingdom of God a few things need to be said.

First, purely at the conceptual level, people do not *readily* abandon their belief system in exchange for another. This is especially so if there is a high level of commitment being shown as opposed to some passing fancy ('I am going through a Buddhist phase'). For example, if one shows a faith to be inconsistent or lacking comprehensiveness, what a person will do is, (a) put such matters on hold in the hope that something will come up later which will make up for the deficiency or (b) make some modification which accommodates the criticism or (c) live with the tension until the cumulative weight of evidence to the contrary is such that a crisis of faith is generated and it can no longer be held with any integrity. Or it may be the case that a person sees the Christian faith to maintain the best elements of their faith and far exceed it. It is the *positive* attraction of the alternative which causes a change in belief. This rarely takes place for intellectual reasons alone, as we saw with the quote from Williams, often so much more is involved, not least the day to day witness of the lives of believers.

Secondly, many discussions of epistemology make the mistake of restricting matters of knowledge and how we come to know to the realm of the intellect alone. The fact is there are often other factors at work. People consider the relationship between faith and reason and certainty and knowledge, but omit questions concerning the role of the will and desire. If, as is usually the case, knowledge entails commitment to action, then action requires an act of the will and that in turn is influenced by certain desires which are linked to goals we hope to achieve. Here is an experience common to anyone engaged in evangelism amongst students. Imagine that you are arguing with Fred about the Gospel. He has read Mark's Gospel and he agrees Jesus seems to be who Mark claims he is—the son of God. The evidence for the resurrection is considered to be overwhelming. What is more he is pretty impressed with the lives of fellow Christians. He knows that his own beliefs, (if you can call them that) are not well grounded. But nonetheless he keeps arguing, pointing to 'problems' with the Christian religion suffering in the world, the origin of evil, the track record of the church, and so on. Is his problem primarily intellectual? Not necessarily. It may be that the real problem is that he is sleeping with his girlfriend and knows that if he were to become a Christian that will have to stop. The point we are making is that the will affects the intellect—what a person is willing to 'see'. For example, the 'Rich Young Ruler's' problem was not primarily intellectual—he understood the commandments and in some measure who Jesus was ('Good teacher') and understood what he said—but he did not want to let go of his

wealth. On the face of it the people who came to Jesus in Mark 12 have serious 'epistemological problems'—the legitimacy of paying taxes to Caesar, the nature of the resurrection, which commandment is the greatest and so on. But the root problem was moral or spiritual they did not *want* to know the truth instead they wanted to score debating points against Jesus in order to undermine his authority and standing. In each case the will and motives affected their assessment of Jesus and shaped how they would respond to him.

There are two important issues here. The first is that in the case of Christianity we cannot approach the matter in a disinterested 'take it or leave it' way, as we can, for example, the question of whether Pepsi is better than Coke—especially if you don't like either! There are profound existential issues involved. Secondly, since we are dealing with *personal* knowledge, that is knowledge of persons (God in Jesus Christ) as distinct from knowledge of objects or abstract ideas, certain preconditions need to be met. If I am going to gain personal knowledge of another person, especially someone who occupies a higher status than I, I cannot gain that knowledge if I approached matters in the same way as I would finding out whether a certain pen was of good quality. In the case of the latter I take an object, carry out a test to see if it is a good pen (sample writing) and then make my judgement. There is certain superiority in my approach. But in gaining access to a person a prerequisite is a disposition of *humility*. I am dependent upon *them* revealing themselves to me. I must allow them to make their judgments of *me*. In fact, any brash, superior approach on my part might have the opposite effect—I could end up with less knowledge. This is because of the nature of the relationship I am entering into. *If* there is a God and *if* this God has taken steps to make himself known, then it is reasonable to adopt such a disposition if I am going to gain any meaningful knowledge of him. Maybe this in part is what Jesus means when he says 'I tell you the truth, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it' (Mark 10:16).

All of this ties in with what Pascal wrote in his Pensees: 'People despise the Christian faith. They hate it and are afraid that it may be true. The solution for this is to show them, first of all, that it is not unreasonable, that it is worthy of reverence and respect. Then show that it is winsome, making good men desire that it were true. Then show them that it really is true. It is worthy of reverence because it really understands the human condition. It is also attractive because it promises true goodness.' There are three kinds of people, he said, 'those who

have found God and serve him; those who are busy seeking him and not found him; those who live without either seeking or finding him.'

The discussion of motives and will brings us to another aspect of epistemology which is often overlooked, namely what is called the 'noetic effects of sin', that is the fact that we are not intellectually or morally neutral. Sin has a benighting effect and the more we persist in sin, the darker our thinking becomes, (Rom. 1:18ff). What knowledge we have of God is suppressed. Again let us hear Pascal: 'I marvel at the audacity with which some people presume to speak of God. In giving their evidence to unbelievers, usually their first chapter is to prove the existence of God from works of nature. I would not be surprised about this project if they were addressing their arguments to believers, for those with a living faith in their hearts can clearly see at once that everything that exists is entirely the work of the God whom they worship. But for those in whom this light has been extinguished and in whom we are trying to rekindle it, the pride of faith and grace, such people see nature only by this light and find only obscurity and darkness. To such I say that they have only to look around, and they will see in the least of things God plainly revealed. Give them no other evidence of this great and weighty manner than the course of the moon and the planets. If such an argument were to be presented to them, no wonder they would react and say that the proofs or our religion are feeble indeed, and reason and expedience tell me that nothing is more likely to bring it into contempt in their sight. But this is not how Scripture speaks, with its better knowledge of the things of God. On the contrary, it speaks of God as the hidden God, and because nature has been corrupted, he has left men in their blindness. They can only escape from this through Jesus Christ, for without him all communication with God is severed. 'No one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Matt. 11:27).'

There are two routes we can take as we come to the subject of how we can know God, which is the subject of revelation. One route is pre-suppositional. This would take the form of arguing that *if* there is a personal God who wishes people to know him, then we might expect him to find a way of telling us about his person and purposes, especially if he has appeared historically. The way in which historical actions and people's purposes are communicated is through writing. That is the claim of the Bible and the veracity of the claim can be investigated along the lines outlined above in terms of its explanatory

power as well as the role of corroborative evidence (e.g. external historical references which reinforce the credibility of the biblical writers). There is a certain appealing logic to this of course, but it is dependent upon the 'If – then' approach when it may be the 'If' which is in question.

The second route would be to approach the Bible, and especially the New Testament as literature which purports to be historical. Not only do we allow it to tell its own story, opening us up to the words, works and person of Jesus of Nazareth, we also consider alternative 'explanations' to see how compelling they are (e.g. that the resurrection is a myth or the body was stolen). So there is an external objective element to our investigation. Here we will be concerned with questions of literary integrity, witness reliability and the like. In so doing we may come to the conclusion that Jesus is none other than Emmanuel—God with us. If so, and we have reliable access to his words, the *ipssisima vox* if not always the *ipssisima verba* of Jesus, then we shall weigh very carefully what he has to say on a whole range of matters, including the Scriptures. Following this through we see that he takes the Old Testament to be the Word of God and in turn he also prepares the way for the New. This data of Scripture in which divine authority is grounded and which provides evidence that the Bible is the Word of God is thus discovered *a posteriori*. It is a matter of taking a look for oneself. There is a strong element of induction involved here.

However, there is much more to knowing and 'testing' the Bible's veracity than that. There is not only evidence that the Bible is the Word of God in terms of statements to that effect, but the Scriptures *function* that way. The Bible comes to us in its various literary forms not only providing *information*; it functions to bring about *transformation*. This, if you will, is the epistemological subject element which complements the metaphysical objective reality to which Scripture refers. The Bible offers a diagnosis of the human condition to which conscience and experience will concur. It also contains promises which if the Word of God we shall find in experience to hold good in the life of the reader. New life is offered and the forgiveness of sin is enjoyed as we are reconciled to God. Purpose is given which is living for God and other people as we discover we were made for fellowship. Hope is offered on the basis of the resurrection and the judgement to come. Prayer is said to be a meaningful activity, and commands and standards are presented that focus an integrated life for the believer. What is more, there is an 'inter-subjective' element in that this same

outlook and experience is shared with us by people from different ages and differing cultures. It might be helpful to think of it this way: we may be impressed if someone claims to be a king. We are more impressed when they exercise the prerogatives of a king (which is what Jesus did). So it is with the Book which claims to be the Word of God—it actually functions in this way.

This brings us to insight offered to us by what is called 'speech act theory' which has been helpfully explored by Kevin Vanhoozer We shall not go into detail here, but in outline this theory holds that much (if not all) language is designed not simply to inform (and so comes in the indicative mood) but to perform, that is, bring about a change in states of affairs. We *do* things with words. Such utterances are called 'performatives'. The common example given is when a bride and groom say 'I will' in the wedding service. That is not a *description* of marriage or simply conveying an intention, it is *bringing* about a marriage. A speech act can be broken down into its 'locution'—propositional content (meaning), its illocutionary force-the type of act—command, promise, question, and the perlocution—the effect on the hearer (repentance, belief, regeneration, obedience, etc). The gospel message is not simply a description of what God has done on the cross it is the *means* by which he brings into effect in the life of the hearer the purpose of his death and resurrection, namely, reconciliation. Vanhoozer proposes that God is a communicative agent and that the Bible in its entirety is a communicative act- a speech act of the sovereign God. The gospel contains a summons to repent and believe (illocutionary force), not simply understand and admire.

But how are the noetic effects of sin mitigated? The answer: by the work of the Holy Spirit. The role of the Spirit is not to illumine the truth, but the *mind*. The Spirit does not add to the Word, but he does have an effect on the hearer in that the Spirit *administers* the Word. This, I think, is what Calvin means when he speaks of the 'internal testimony of the Holy Spirit.' This is not some conviction brought about *apart* from the Word or *beside* the Word, but *in* and *through* the Word. Hence, Paul speaking of the Word as 'the Sword of the Spirit' he wields the Word to produce its intended effect (making wise unto salvation). Vanhoozer describes this work of the Spirit on the Word as 'advening' (rather than supervening)—coming to the Word when and where God wills to make it efficacious.

Vanhoozer uses an intriguing analogy to illustrate the work of the Spirit in this way. He refers to the biography of Helen Keller. He says that her problem—

someone who was blind and deaf could be brought to understand language—parallels that of a sinner whose mind is darkened and ears are closed to God's call. She actually writes of her coming to understand in terms of a religious conversion. One day her teacher began to spell words on Helen's hands, tracing the letters with her finger. Helen learnt to imitate the movements which spelt out the words, but failed to understand what the movements were. They were just meaningless movements. One day her teacher spelled the word w-a-t-e-r into one of Helen's hands as she held the other hand under a spout of running water and the mystery of language was suddenly revealed. Helen later wrote: 'I knew then that water meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. The living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set free.' Vanhoozer writes: 'Here is no impersonal physical force, but a wonderful example of how communicative acts can achieve liberating effects. Helen's teacher, a miracle worker like the Holy Spirit, ministered the words and brought about understanding.'

Herein lies hope for effective gospel communication and the 'epistemological revolution' needed. Although God uses appointed means to bring people to faith- apologetic preaching for example—the ultimate apologist is God himself. 'Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit' says the Lord.' (Zech. 4:6). It is from this glorious fact that the apologist can take great comfort.

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ENDNOTES

1. Professor Alister McGrath, 'A fine-tuned universe: science, theology and the quest for meaning,' 2009 Gifford Lectures, the University of Aberdeen.
2. Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Paternoster, 1980), pp. 411-15.
3. See Stephen William's helpful essay, 'Faith and certainty,' in *Keeping your Balance*, Philip Duce and Daniel Strange (eds.) (Leicester: IVP, 2001).
4. David L. Wolfe, *Epistemology*, (IVP, Grove, 1982).
5. *Op. cit.*, p. 102.
6. Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity against the challenges of postmodernism* (IVP, 2000).
7. See Kevin J Vanhoozer, *Is there meaning in this text?* (IVP, 1998) and *First Theology* (IVP, 2002).
8. *Ibid.*, p. 122.