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The Sacred Hill We Climb: Contours of a Defensible Sacred Narrative

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Abstract As meaning-seeking creatures, our transitory passage through this world conveys the urgency of understanding the nature of the human condition. What has emerged over time are a variety of sacred narratives that people find meaningful, even though universally encumbered with problems. The task of this article is to develop some of the key process details of the author's book, titled, *The Sacred Hill We Climb*. It seeks to assess some of the tools that can build credibility into such a narrative. Because the sacred category has a narrow grounding to the perceptual world, there is wisdom in engaging it in a prudential way, even while many true believers quite readily proceed categorically—offering up defining concepts of truth and error (or a darker contrast of truth and heresy). Because a great portion of the sacred landscape is weakened by its non-perceptual features, process is elevated in importance if a credible belief is to be advanced—one that can guide on the appropriateness of categorical thinking. It therefore gives thought to reason differentiating knowledge from opinion, fact from fiction, and certainty from uncertainty. We find facts and knowledge elevating certainty on what can be termed a 'process hierarchy.' By way of process, we can assess some ideas as being more certain and therefore credible than others, even if ambiguities remain. It is a method that can apprise us as to what is knowable regarding the sacred, and the degree to which we can be certain about the things we may hold as true and dear. It is a conversation that invites both the believing and non-believing communities to a discussion on the sacred hill we climb.

Keywords Agnosticism, Sacred, Atheism, Skepticism, Assumptions, Religion, Presupposition, Opinion, Certainty, Uncertainty, Knowledge, Theology, Theism, Nontheistic, Theology, Inerrancy, Exvangelical, Meaning, Deconstruction, Myth, Faith, Doubt, Foundationalism, Fundamentalism, Perceptual, Non-Perceptual, Science

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Introduction

Humans are born as meaning-seeking creatures. We see evidence of this everywhere in the proliferation of belief systems that offer overarching worldviews, even though there are good reasons to recognize them all to be fraught with problems. Nevertheless, many live under the illusion that their worldview closely reflects reality. This illusion often manifests as outward conviction, where individuals project certainty on matters that reason clearly shows cannot be known on definitive terms.

In this article we will examine some of the problems encountered with any pursuit of truth, and as we will examine, it is particularly problematic for all sacred quests.

A Few Thoughts about Knowledge

If we are empiricists or philosophical realists, we will generally not deny that truth exists. But we may recognize its opaqueness at the human level, given the difficulty we have of aligning our minds with any definitive understanding of physical reality. Achieving even an approximate understanding takes effort and a disciplined methodology. For this reason, it should generally be recognized that “truth talk” is inappropriate when not grounded in a process of systematic thought, precision, and appropriate qualifications.

On matters involving physical entities—we are referring here to things accessible to our five senses—we can readily demonstrate why it is best to keep our conclusions tentative. Surface-level observation is notoriously insufficient for mature understanding. This is why science pursues reductionistic inquiry, in the quest for the lowest foundational components of matter so as to understand how it all fits together. The atom was once thought to be its smallest unit, but we have long-since learned that there is an entire world of subatomic particles that must be accounted for. This quantum world has been difficult to navigate partly due to its size-scale, but also due to the fact that it behaves in unexpected ways, making it obvious that there are gaps in our understanding. Furthermore, science is still searching for the “bottom,” which underscore the incompleteness of knowledge regarding the physical world.

As we contrast the perceptual world composed of observable objects with that of the non-perceptual (including the metaphysical), we are capable of better understanding the limits we are dealing with in this latter category. For things that do not offer any sensory input, how would we build any sort of certainty into our understanding? Yet, we often find the religious world dismissive of the senses, particularly when the science narrative runs against held beliefs. Because of this skepticism, there may be value in contemplating something of the true power of our senses. Imagine losing all five senses at the same time—no seeing, hearing, touching, tasting or smelling. What we are describing is a form of ultimate solitary confinement. We would utterly lack any capacity to engage meaningfully with the world on any level. This should remind us of the true power represented in the senses.

When we consider what we can know—whether through perception or abstraction—in all cases we must include logic and reason. We generally reserve the most compelling basis for categorical expression to deductive reasoning, where conclusions can be made on definitive terms. In this category we might place things like forms of mathematical expression, definitional knowledge, systems knowledge, and syllogisms. If we don’t have a practical basis for deductive reasoning, we often can turn to the inductive approach, which is the heart of the scientific method. This latter method yields conclusions that, while not absolute, do approach a relative level of definitiveness about the physical world. Yet because this form of knowledge remains incomplete, there are limits to our ability to speak in absolute terms. It is by recognizing the boundaries of what we can know through our senses that we gain insight into the limitations of categorical expression for the non-perceptual category, including metaphysical claims. Yet, this domain is filled with people who elevate aspects of religious belief well beyond what should be considered appropriate. It is not uncommon to even hear condescending talk about the sciences in order to give superseding authority to a contrary sacred narrative. Examples of this would include: belief in a young Earth, notions of the impossibility of evolutionary process, and the certainty of a global flood. In this article, I argue that it is deeply misguided to treat sacred or “inspired” interpretations as having greater authority than perceptual knowledge on such areas of overlap, and the goal will be to demonstrate this more fully in what follows.

As we give thought to this matter, it seems that there is value in thinking about what it means to have knowledge: what it is, what it is not, and how it is acquired. Such reflections may help us resolve tensions between scientific understanding and sacred belief, specifically on issues where they may overlap.

Let's start by thinking of knowledge as the correspondence of belief to reality. The challenge lies not only in achieving this correspondence but also in knowing when we have done so. Toward this end, we might imagine a "certainty scale," with absolute correlations on one end and highly uncertain ones on the other.

Mathematics and other deductive systems appropriately allow for definitive conclusions due to the certainty such methods afford. But unfortunately, most of life does not come with such tidiness. In most cases, we rely on our senses and inductive reasoning through observation—a method that produces high probabilities, even if not absolute certainty. The effectiveness of science in generating reliable results demonstrates the power of this approach.

On the other end of this idea scale, we find the category of opinion. At its very lowest end are mundane ideas that are a part of the vast portion of human discourse. These would be ideas that have not been systematically tested for their correlation to reality. Clearly claims in this realm cannot be appropriately supported by categorical expression, even though categorical language is often invoked. But even when categorical expression is inappropriate, it is important to recognize that not all opinions are equal. Expert opinions, grounded in deep understanding of the evidence, carry a lot more weight than those of uninformed individuals because they are more likely to be closer in reflecting reality.¹

Convergence & Divergence

Now here is a crucial observation: As we think about the entire scale of ideas, with knowledge at the high end, we find here, thought-narratives tending to converge. There is broad agreement, for example, that the Earth is not flat, but is basically round in shape—based partly on both deduction and induction.

Deductive Features Supportive of a Round Earth

- Geometry of shadows—connected with eclipses;
- Laws of gravity, where mass is pulled towards the center;
- Orbital mechanics, where a spherical Earth fits a mathematical model of predictions;
- When we travel due west, we will eventually arrive back at our starting point.

Inductive Features Supportive of a Round Earth

- Ships disappear over the horizon;
- Airplanes follow straight flight paths that appear curved on a flat map;
- Photographic evidence from space;

This, and other evidence so well supports the idea of a round earth, serious thinkers do not dispute it as people have simply converged on this idea. As we explore other ideas at the knowledge level, convergence is often a very prominent feature. But as we descend the idea continuum, to areas we considered to be less than knowledge (we can think here of unstructured thought, such as mundane opinion), we find the opposite of convergence—that is, thinking tends to diverge. At this juncture we may want to query where religious dogma fits on this idea continuum. It doesn't necessarily all involve unstructured thought, and for sure theologians would be quick to argue that they do proceed systematically.

Yet, with literally tens of thousands of institutional variations in dogma and orientation, it is clear that we are dealing with a deeply divergent category. We might not want to call theology "opinion" yet when we have theology contradicting reasonably settled scientific ideas, we may have no choice but to call it "opinion." We will discuss other possible reasons for this divergence momentarily, but the most important point here is to query how any given belief system could credibly run counter to sensory feedback, or proceed in making definitive claims given the evident category divergence?

To better understand why sacred ideas, as a class, may often be seen as having the best fit within the category of opinion, we first must acknowledge the wide, wide array of interpretations that have developed around sacred ideas as a class. This, alone, represents the best argument for why it would seem to have a more logical home within the spectrum of opinion. While some may be uncomfortable with the category of religion being placed at the lower end of

¹ Epistemology has a number of differing schools of thought and there are a variety of views regarding how knowledge should be understood and articulated. What is presented here would be one generalized understanding of it. This is mentioned for readers that have not had wide exposure to this discipline. Extreme skeptics might suggest knowledge to be a fiction entirely, but if we want to live in the practical world, then we must build out a definitional architecture, and that is what this article attempts to do.

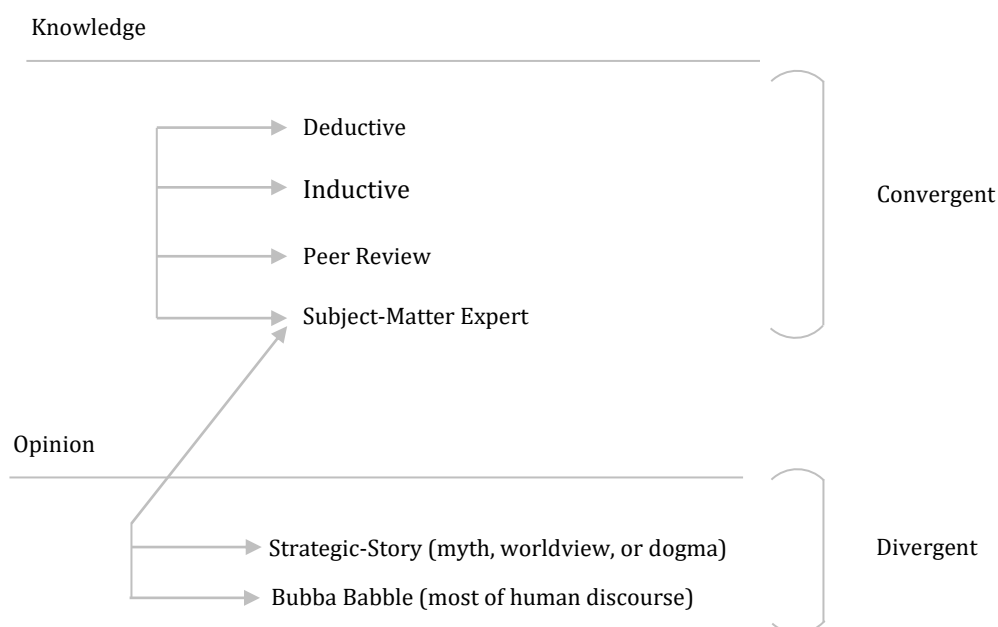
the ideas classification system, it's important to recognize the inherent tenuousness it delivers by its largely non-perceptual nature, as well as by the multitude of discordant voices within the sacred sphere, a domain largely governed by a stack of assumptions, all unmediated by the senses.

Some of the common assumptions the believing community would make, include the following:

- That God exist;
- That God communicates with humans;
- That humans have a reliable methodology for distinguishing between divinely inspired vs. that which may not be;
- That the authors of sacred writings wrote with an accuracy fully faithful to the input coming from the revealing source;
- That these sacred writings were translated correctly;
- That readers interpret the translation accurately, so as to understand what the author intended. Ultimately these understandings then spin out into an array of doctrines we find;
- That we have developed a reliable method for navigating conflicting revelations and have the ability to determine which ones are reliable and which ones aren't;
- That on top of all of these foregoing assumptions would be those that overarch the text itself—verbally inspired, thought inspired, infallible, inerrant, etc.²

To call these ideas assumptions is not to say they are not accurate, yet they get labeled as such because we cannot empirically demonstrate the validity of any of them. They are as a class simply one assumption stacked on the next, all unmediated by the senses, making it difficult to elevate any of it to the standard definition of knowledge. This is reinforced by observing the sacred realm as offering many paths, with none of them delivering on the certitude represented in appropriate definitive expression. How we relate to a given set of sacred assumptions will largely dictate where we end up. As a result, a strong case can be made for sacred claims being evaluated in light of the evidence available in the perceptual world, to the extent possible. This helps ground belief in what we can meaningfully call knowledge.

Discussion Schematic



² All of these would represent examples of some of the typical assumptions that would go into a theistic paradigm.

We refer to our ideas as “assumptions” when proof is lacking. This makes it necessary for people of faith to recognize that beliefs (or dogma statements) are built on assumptions that are inherently tenuous. This observation should not be very controversial, as there is a reason the terms *faith* and *faith traditions* are common parlance.

We have noted that science also operates on certain assumptions, but it is possible to distinguish usage between science and religion. In the sciences, many of the assumptions are well founded empirically. For instance, science assumes the natural order is rational, and thus knowable. While this assumption cannot be categorically proved, it is continually reinforced by consistent outcomes. There are, of course, other assumptions, and occasionally there may be experimental ways in which to move some of them into the formal body of knowledge through evidentiary findings.³ But the larger point is that science doesn’t rest on assumptions alone; it also engages with physical data that provides feedback. When repeated experiments produce the same results, we gain confidence in the accuracy of the operative assumptions, and we often see a general scientific convergence for the ideas founded on those assumptions.

By contrast, the sacred realm is marked by fragmentation, given a diverse and incompatible set of starting assumptions. It is these very starting assumptions that have led to tens of thousands of denominational entities that go in scattered dogma directions. Without sufficient perceptual detail there is no foundational basis upon which to make appropriate course corrections. Even where we limit focus to just the primary Abrahamic traditions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—we find significant theological subdivisions within each, shaped by later prophets, revelations, or interpretative traditions. In the case of the Christian community, it has rallied around the biblical canon compiled by the early church leaders, but even here we find differing communities adopting slightly different canonical arrangements, and among the canon authors we find still more diverge in perspective.⁴

So, at the base level, we are left with an overwhelming diversity of sacred traditions, each grounded in varying revelatory assumptions and interpretations that grow out of them. This all evidences the fraught nature of sacred constructs as a class of ideas. To meaningfully relate them to reality, we must construct a careful interpretive framework—one that prizes internal consistency and alignment with verifiable aspects of the physical world when possible. These tools may help the thoughtful reader form more cohesive understandings, even where foundational ideas are in tension.

Because of all these complications that begin with settling upon initial assumptions, it becomes nearly impossible to apply an objective process that leads to collective consensus in the religious domain. For this reason, a person’s religious identity is most often going to be shaped by nurture, culture, or dispositional preference—much like political identity.

So, as we face the many and varied sacred traditions, we are reminded once again why they do not fare very well on the traditional idea-scale. Sincere belief is not the same as certain, or close to certain, knowledge. At a minimum, we must recognize that a naivete about what we think we know is no substitute for an actual understanding of reality.

As we contemplate the provenance and interpretations connected to revelation, we should recognize that much of its authority is built on traditional assumptions and acceptance of the same—with such then often transforming into certitudes of mind found in thriving fundamentalist communities. While criteria can help guide us in these matters, the real point here is that we have no legitimate capacity to reach black-and-white conclusions, even though many commit this error. For those who live with inappropriate degrees of certitude, it is likely easier to see the vulnerabilities of other’s sacred belief systems than one’s own.

It is also important that we address sacred assumptions that directly contradict publicly accessible physical evidence. In such cases, a decision threshold must be crossed, with it becoming a choice between what may be a comfortable belief tradition, versus the taking of an evidentiary path grounded in observable data that may be pointing in a different direction from what heretofore had been believed. If we find value in linking belief with actual knowledge, the decision on this should not be difficult, yet, we frequently encounter religious beliefs that dismiss or resist clear interpretations of physical evidence.

³ As an example, Einstein’s theory of relativity suggests that the nature of *time* is relative, rather than fixed. For those who adopted this idea when it was first proposed, it was necessary to accept it as an assumption. However, it was an assumption that was testable, and experiments since have confirmed that time is indeed relative. Such confirmation has moved this assumption into our body of knowledge.

⁴ The most obvious example would be the Old Testament understanding of the divine nature, sometimes portrayed in very unflattering terms, approaching that of a genocidal monster. This can be contrasted with the, versus the New Testament understanding of a loving God.

Even outside the sacred cocoon, there are many examples of people failing to pay adequate attention to the empirical data. A recent example of this was the COVID pandemic in terms of how a large portion of the public turned its back on good science in the midst of a public health crisis—a crisis that struggled for a way to overcome a virus for which millions refused to take the most basic optimizing steps. It is possible that behaving this way served as a badge of one's tribal credentials, but statistically it was a lethal decision for many, where we had a social dimension influencing people to ignore important evidence that might otherwise have had significant life-implications.

If we wish to break out of a suboptimal pattern, we must learn how to think and discern between reliable and unreliable ideas (as opposed to gravitating to that which we are partial to), and from there develop a systematic process approach that can deliver beliefs that optimize outcomes because of a heightened connection to the way things really are. Ultimately, this is an important matter that hangs over all of us in which we must learn to relinquish one or more beliefs we may otherwise be partial to because they no longer withstand scrutiny. The headwinds in a discussion like this stem largely from the vast number of people firmly rooted in particular belief systems—often ones never critically examined and with little motivation to move beyond the status quo. If enough people are participating it may seem to be a legitimate path, even if evidentiary and statistically it can be shown to be dead wrong. Many are simply immersed in the sentimentalities of belief, which then shape their engagement with life, perhaps even at the expense of a factual connection with the world. In some cases, belief can be treated as a non-negotiable—in scope, content, and/or attitude. We frequently see a pattern in which individuals are not open to evidence that challenges their convictions, giving little thoughtful attention to data that might call those convictions into question.

If all revelations were consistent, one major complication would be removed—but they aren't. As previously noted, we live in a world of diverse and often contradictory sacred revelations, each claiming divine origin and offering differing accounts of human and divine reality. On top of that are the differing ways in which people approach a sacred text, including the level of authority they are willing to give it. The natural result has been this multiplicity of religious traditions emerging from these differing revelatory themes, and should, in itself, serve as a cautionary tale against the uncritical embrace of any single tradition. Wisdom may lie in recognizing that we might be wrong about some things. Yet, the human longing for certainty in an uncertain world often draws individuals toward rigid religious commitments and expression, sometimes to the point of denying reality available in the form of physical evidence.

The Genesis creation narrative offers a great example of the intersection of religious belief and physical evidence. With belief being based on an interpretation of Scripture, some are convinced that the universe was created just a few thousand years ago over the course of six literal days.⁵ Much of the tension between science and religion in this area can be understood historically. The Judeo-Christian tradition emerged long before modern science entered the scene, and one of the prevailing views was that of a young Earth. This assumption profoundly influenced early scientific thought, which largely adopted the belief uncritically. As late as the seventeenth century, this represented the dominant understanding within the sciences. It was not until a body of physical evidence started accumulating to the contrary that the scientific community began recognizing their earlier assumption to be increasingly difficult to defend. This shift created friction with religious authorities, some of whom saw scientific findings as a threat to revealed truth—a tension that persists in some quarters to this day.⁶

When conflicts such as this arise, there is a tendency for a segment of the religious community to argue that they are holders of revealed truth and that all understandings of reality must bend accordingly—even when physical evidence points elsewhere. The illusion is that ideas derived from religious dogma, creeds, a statement of fundamental beliefs,

⁵ See generally, *Genesis*, Chapter One; historically, the age of the Earth was determined by stringing the identified ages of the main patriarchs together, as done by the 16th century Archbishop James Ussher. Using this approach, he dated the biblical creation on October 23, 4004 BCE. The weakness of this argument is based on age gaps, as well as the fact that only one biblical event is absolutely and securely dated to the day, the month and year, and that is the conquest of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, per Siegfried H. Horn (a biblical archeologist of some note). See *Spectrum Magazine*, "Can the Bible Establish the Age of the Earth?" Vol. 38, Issue 3 (2010). His conclusion is categorical that the age of the Earth cannot be based on information in the Bible. There is also a strong likelihood that the long ages of the patriarchs named in the bible are based on numerology—not chronological ages. If this latter theory is accurate, it further demolishes any attempts to use the Bible as a dating method. For this latter discussion, please see Carol Hill, *A Worldview Approach to Science and Scripture* (2019), p. 41-53.

⁶ For a detailed discussion of this history, see Davis A. Young & Ralph F. Stearley, *The Bible, Rocks and Time: Geological Evidence for the Age of the Earth*; IVP Academics (2008). These authors are both Christians and geologists. They provide a rather robust discussion of the history involving this subject and provide sound reasons why the peer reviewed science should be taken seriously. See also, Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists: From Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design*, Harvard University Press (2006)

or from the words of Scripture, offer an appropriate accountability framework. But, as we've already outlined, the inappropriateness of elevating authority for revealed claims can be demonstrated empirically.⁷ Even when all the process steps are followed, we will likely still come up short of full understanding. Yet, the method we use matters; primarily because it provides a framework for making beliefs accountable. And by recognizing the hierarchy of ideas discussed earlier, there is a compelling case that religious guardians of dogma should take seriously the findings of science—not because science will always be completely right, but because peer-reviewed science is the gold standard for a genuine knowledge of the mechanics of the universe. If truth is the goal, we cannot ignore what science is telling us. If truth is not the goal, then religious belief lacks any tether to the real world.⁸

Process Architecture

While it is possible to see the value of sacred ideas falling somewhere towards the low end of the knowledge scale—that is, somewhere in the realm of opinion, there is another way to approach this matter that can elevate the sacred on the scale of knowledge. This approach comes to us from the thinking of Michael Polanyi, who offers a slightly different approach to the framework of knowledge. He was a 20th century scholar with an academic background in both science and philosophy. He had a keen sense of the limits of knowledge, and proposed that we should think of knowledge as having two parts—explicit and implicit, and with them coming as a package. For Polanyi, implicit knowledge includes the background assumptions that underpin our more formal, articulated understandings—what he termed tacit knowledge. In his view, all explicit knowledge is grounded in this tacit element, conferring on the tacit a position of central importance. Its importance can be demonstrated when we recognize that when people start with different assumptions, the logical ends can be quite different, and this would be particularly the case for the entire non-perceptual category. So, there is a basis for recognizing the importance of the tacit element in the knowledge structure.⁹

While he was not applying this insight to sacred concepts per se, it is not difficult to see its potential application, where our big-picture assumptions achieve credibility particularly when we allow empirical data to validate our understandings wherever and whenever it can. We honor belief and convey credibility when we have sensitivity to the knowledge-domain architecture we've been discussing—namely, one that permits physical evidence and reason to guide interpretation of our sacred assumptions in areas where it can do so. Approaching things in this manner enhances our potential for aligning belief with reality in a way that would otherwise remain out of reach.

When a tacitly sacred understanding partners with observations from the perceptual world, it conveys a broad appreciation for knowledge, recognizing that it comes with an accountability mechanism—seeking to validate whatever parts of a metaphysical belief we can through empirical data. Credibility is never advanced when we put forward assumed beliefs and then go on to ignore knowledge that runs counter to it. Conversely, when the sacred becomes a philosophical partner with science its most important role is that of providing high-level guidance as to meaning—while deferring to sense and reason to interpret the details of physical reality.

When science misinterprets the evidence, it is equipped with a self-correcting mechanism: new discoveries have the power to revise previous understandings. Since scientists do not generally regard their current models as absolute “truth,” they are under less pressure to defend those models when conflicting evidence arises. This built-in openness strengthens the scientific enterprise—one that has demonstrably served humanity reliably well. We see its benefits everywhere, from medicine, to technology, to our understanding of the cosmos. Yet this openness is often a point of ridicule within some religious communities, where it is viewed with suspicion, or even dismissed outright by guardians of orthodoxy—particularly when it challenges long-held beliefs that are difficult to defend empirically.¹⁰

⁷ For example, in Genesis 1:14-19, we learn that the Sun was created on day-4, yet if this text is read literally, how would the prior days have been determined since the only context for “day” is the relationship of the earth to the Sun? If this passage is read poetically or metaphorically, such absurdities can be avoided.

⁸ To be clear, this should not be understood as an argument demanding religious dogma to be subservient to science but simply another way of saying that commitment to truth requires dogma not to become the opponent of scientific conclusions.

⁹ See, generally, Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, University of Chicago Press (1974). It is here that Polanyi proposes a way to think about the knowledge process, namely, arguing that our assumptions (what he refers to as “tacit knowing”) should be considered a part of the knowledge paradigm, for it is key to all that follows, and plays a fundamental role in the thinking process. Polanyi was not focused on theology when he developed this approach, yet the potential contribution it makes to religious understanding is undeniable. This is discussed in some detail in the book, *The Sacred Hill We Climb*, as referenced in Note 1 above, but receives only brief mention here due to space considerations.

¹⁰ To be clear, this should not be understood as an argument demanding religious dogma to be subservient to science but simply another way of saying that commitment to truth requires dogma not to become the opponent of scientific conclusions.

Human experience, however, has demonstrated that this open, provisional approach is far superior to dogmatic inflexibility when our aim is to engage the world as it actually is.

When insufficient attention is paid to physical evidence, it allows unexamined traditional interpretations, including the details of sacred stories, to persist without challenge. The complexity of the evidence—and the way it can run counter to certain theological narratives—only adds to the difficulty. Some in the ecclesial community continue to resist allowing physical evidence to inform their interpretation of sacred texts. For them, it is seen as inappropriate to suggest that a sacred text, or its interpretation, might be erroneous—or that science might assist in deepening our understanding of the sacred. This resistance is by no means universal, but there are still strongholds within the broader religious landscape that reject the findings and logic of science, often in the name of protecting “truth.”

So, whichever approach to knowledge we use—the idea continuum, with knowledge and opinion running on a continuum, or Polanyi’s proposal that we connect assumptions to our understanding of knowledge, or some combination of each—if we are to advance our theological understandings in a way that increases its linkage to reality, it will be necessary to examine sacred claims through the filter of empirical methodology. Indeed, the non-perceptual world, including the world of sacred ideas, has the capacity to remediate aspects of belief built entirely on stacked assumptions by applying this process-architecture that connects belief to reality where possible. It also encourages us to explore the proper relationship between belief and doubt, distinguishing those sacred elements that carry more weight from those that are less certain. In doing so, we may arrive at a more honest and compelling articulation of belief—even if that process unsettles some prior assumptions.

There will likely be many readers who are fully aware of the nebulous frameworks we often live by because there is a common recognition that *belief* and *faith* are so named because of the lack of clear and proximate certitudes. We can know that instinctually, given the plethora of faith traditions, which illustrates its divergent features. In spite of all this, it is ironic that on sacred matters, the word *truth* sometimes gets thrown around rather loosely—something we’ve discussed above. It is also noteworthy that once an idea is regarded as truth, there are few motivations to do any further inquiry. For this reason, it seems more appropriate for those living within a metaphysical bubble to think of truth as a process and not an endpoint.

In contrast to the nebulous elements inherent in the sacred, it is our proximity to the physical world of sensate data that must loom as an overriding factor in any consideration of the most reliable approach for acquiring knowledge about the physical world. So, as we distinguish perceptual knowledge that comes to us from the more concrete aspects of the physical world, we must contrast such understandings with the nebulous features that are innate to all sacred sources. It is not just the sacred writers or their writings we are talking about, but the entire package of what is termed *revelation*. The lack of a universal standard for assessing sources and methods means that we don’t have a process by which to validate some of the basics other than traditional acceptance, internal consistency, and personal conviction. These factors loom as important reasons why ecclesial assertions should be filtered by physical evidence when possible.

By assuming that revisions of our thinking may occasionally be necessary, we create an intellectual climate for accountability. It is noteworthy that this is, in fact, the way the scientific community tends to relate to their own internal debates, where scientists are known to change their minds over ideas they hold when compelling new evidence emerges to the contrary. The necessary modifications may be large or small, but it is the frame of mind that makes any of this possible. The ecclesial community would do well to operate with a similar nimbleness but will likely find this more difficult within the context of “institutionalism” and “the truth paradigm.”

Meaning and its Challenges

As we have shown, absolutes are seldom available to us, and so we are better served by keeping our claims modest. In fact, it may be helpful to think of sacred assumptions as philosophical concepts where an explanation has been built surrounded by supporting evidence. If we were to presuppose rationality at the heart of the universal order, it should be understood as a critical concept in the formation of a sacred paradigm. Many will impute the fingerprint of intelligence from the mathematical precision around which the physical universe operates, including the specified functional complexity associated with biological DNA. Yet, there is wisdom in acknowledging that none of this coerces on us the idea of a designer at the center of it all, even though none of this subtracts from the possibility.

To be sure, any thoughts of intelligence at the center of the universal order are way beyond science, yet if it is kept as a philosophical idea, we note that it is not inconsistent with many of the observations that come to us from the

natural order. It is also an idea for which many will find meaning, affording the possibility of a sacred paradigm that aligns with what we know from science. In this regard, perhaps the greatest contribution of science is in its ability to connect us with the physical world, while the sacred domain contributes purpose and meaning at a higher level.

Sacred values have the capacity to shape and mold culture in constructive ways, even while ambiguity, mystery, and imprecision remain fundamental aspects of all sacred paradigms. Philosophers and theologians have created a rich series of logical formulations for putting the sacred narrative on an enhanced footing, but ultimately, belief is constructed largely on faith (assumptions) rather than public evidence that might otherwise greatly enhance verification.

In the final analysis, some of these issues go to the heart of how we find meaning in life. Victor Frankl, in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*,¹¹ details the ways in which humans can achieve meaning, one, of which, is through transcendence—recognizing that meaning can be found in sacred values. Such values have the capacity to shape and mold culture in constructive ways, even while ambiguity, mystery, and imprecision remain fundamental aspects of all sacred paradigms. But meaning can also deliver a dark shadow, as humans often war over the things they find meaningful. The very vehicle that, at its finest, offers the potential to elevate humans out of the competitive swamp of survival and domination, unfortunately sometimes also seeds its own destructive impulses, pitting tribe against tribe, each attempting to appropriate and impose a vision of the divine will. Sometimes, it manifests through institutions but also through smaller social subsets. The world is full of true believers who, in some cases, are all too willing to embrace the lower features of belief, overriding evidence and reason in the process. For this, humanity continues to pay a steep price. In the words of Will Durant, “We can only mourn over the absurdities for which men [humanity] have died.”¹²

Summary

This discussion is relevant in that an individual's approach to sacred beliefs is often mediated through faith communities where sacred concerns are sufficiently pervasive to shape how the human story is understood, and how it engages with the world. If our concept of God is of one who operates as the great cosmic mind behind what most would regard as a rational physical order, then scientific inquiry should be seen as an important branch of theology—offering a window into the mind of God. To have a process-oriented methodology similar to what we have discussed, keeps the sciences authoritative in any reading of Scripture and can aid sacred interpretations. With science building knowledge of this world, through observation and reason, it should be seen as offering up a reliable guide to biblical interpretations on areas in which it overlaps with the scientific domain.

This has not been a comprehensive review, as its primary aim has been to provide the broad outlines of the nature of the problem—differentiating the domains of science and religion, offering a cursory contrast in methodologies, and suggesting ways to avoid unnecessary conflict between disciplines. The description of science presented here has been stylized to highlight the general distinctions between it and the ways in which sacred conclusions are typically formed. Reality is often messier than this discussion may suggest. Still, the overarching contrast of attitudes towards truth between science and religion is significant—and understanding that difference is crucial if the sacred community is to maximize its connection to reality.

Much of the friction between these domains could likely be diminished—or even eliminated—if sacred constructs focused less on defending conclusions and more on participating in what ought to be the shared quest of both disciplines: discovering the most reliable process and best approximation of reality. Holding sacred dogma lightly when sensate knowledge is available can aid in neutralizing conflict. It allows religious traditions to have a grounded connection to the physical world while still cultivating a meaningful framework for interpreting life's deeper questions.

In his book, titled *Uncertain Belief*, David Bartholomew suggests that in the absence of a reliable source of sense-based knowledge about specific sacred claims, we ought to think in terms of probabilities. For the devout believer, whose faith may hinge on certainty, this approach may feel uncomfortable—even irreverent. But for those who see faith and uncertainty as natural companions, to operate with a probabilistic mindset feels both appropriate and necessary. By proceeding inductively—gathering evidence and weighing hypotheses—may seem a bit clinical for

¹¹ See generally, Victor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Beacon Press (2006), where the author discusses several ways in which humans go about bringing meaning to life.

¹² This quote can be found in the works of Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization Volume IV: The Age of Faith*.

ideas that bring meaning. Yet, this is the human condition and we have little other choice to the extent that we wish to remain true to intellect.

In the practical world, most of us do not come to judgments based on certainties, but on reasoned estimations of likelihood. Naturally, there is a desire to assess just how precise or credible such probabilities can be. The more credible the framework, the better we can gauge the level of trust or engagement warranted. If we knew ahead of time that boarding a particular flight would deliver 50-50 odds of a safe arrival, our level of engagement would be far different than if the odds were closer to 11 million to 1. Rational belief operates on a continuum—from certainty to uncertainty—and with enough information, we can better calibrate our convictions and engagements.¹³

It is well established that humans have the capacity to rationalize just about any tribal position, even when it requires compromises with a fair reading of evidence to the contrary. The power of tribal ties would seem to be connected to a desire for belonging. When we feel as though we belong, it is quite easy to overlook matters that we might otherwise see as red flags. On top of that, we live in a postmodern age where facts no longer seem to matter to many people, leaving all of us without a shared factual landscape. Instead, we often find a predisposition of some to believe whatever it is they want to believe, in spite of actual certifiable facts to the contrary.

Even if we see this discussion as reasonable, we must recognize the lurking shadow of bias. Yale-trained social psychologist, Jonathan Haidt, has argued that human reasoning is often less a search for truth and more an exercise in justifying preexisting intuitions—usually tied to tribal loyalties, emotional affiliations, and group identity. We see this not only in religious communities but also in political, and other cultural contexts. The tribal pull can be so strong that even those who publicly affirm the values of science may find themselves selectively ignoring or distorting evidence when it threatens their in-group status.¹⁴

There can be other motives at play as well. Many seek a harbor of certainty in an insecure world by elevating unwarranted attitudes about the sacred. We see this in thriving fundamentalist communities where certitudes of mind are well represented. This article has sought above all, whether for psychological or sociological reasons, to redirect such attitudes towards a more evidence-based mode of engagement—one that honors our human intellectual capacity and the capacity of the physical world to act as a reliable source of knowledge. This suggested approach may not squelch tribal impulses or a desire for certainty, but it can deliver more realism to life. What we can applaud most is its capacity to bring credibility to that which we find meaningful, and to do so with perceptual knowledge.

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¹³ See generally, David J. Bartholomew, *Uncertain Belief: Is it Rational to be a Christian?* Oxford University Press (2000). The author makes the general case for approaching religious belief from the angle of probabilities, given there can be no certainty of any of it. It is an attempt at bringing more credibility to sacred endeavors, and to do so along mathematical lines.

¹⁴ See generally, Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. Haidt provides a fascinating discussion about the workings of human nature and observes that we are more governed by tribalism than by a rational accounting of belief.