

# Knowing Christ Today

*Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge*

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# Introduction

THIS BOOK IS about knowledge and about claims to knowledge in relationship to life and Christian faith. It is concerned, more precisely, with the trivialization of faith apart from knowledge and with the disastrous effects of a *repositioning* of faith in Jesus Christ, and of life as his students, *outside* the category of knowledge. This is one result of the novel and politically restricted understanding of knowledge that has captured our social institutions and the popular mind over the last two centuries in the Western world.

Serious and thoughtful Christians today find themselves in a quandary about knowledge, on the one hand, and religious belief and practice, on the other. It is a socially imposed quandary. In the context of modern life and thought, they are urged to treat their central beliefs as something *other* than knowledge—something, in fact, far *short of* knowledge. Those beliefs are to be relegated to the categories of sincere opinion, emotion, blind commitment, or behavior traditional for their social group. And yet they cannot escape the awareness that those beliefs do most certainly come into *conflict* with what is regarded as knowledge in educational and professional circles of public life. This conflict has profound effects upon how they hold and practice religious beliefs and how they present them to others.

Those effects are most clearly seen, on the public stage, in the repositioning of Christian teachers and leaders during the last century. They have been left to preside over the rituals of one or another cultural subgroup that, from the viewpoint of received knowledge, is nothing more than a sociological phenomenon—an “opiate” of certain people—having nothing to do with knowledge of a reality with which all human beings must come to terms. This means that Christian teachers are left in the position of trying to coax and wheedle people into professing things and doing things by some means other than providing them knowledge of reality—hoping, perhaps, for “divine lightning” to strike their souls and bring them around.

The perceived gap between what is counted as knowledge and the offerings of Christian teachers is a reflection of the worldwide acceptance of the science and technology of the Western world, but not of the Christian framework of knowledge that gave rise to it. As Anglican theologian Lesslie Newbigin remarks, however: “No faith can command a man’s final and absolute allegiance, that is to say no faith can be a man’s real religion, if he knows that it is only true for certain places and certain people. In a world which knows that there is only one physics and one mathematics, religion cannot do less than claim for its affirmations a like universal validity.”<sup>1</sup>

A natural outcome of this felt tension between the central things Christians believe and what is accepted as knowledge of reality is the *destabilization* of belief and practice. Belief as *mere* belief—“my personal opinion,” as we now ritually say—is already unstable in its own right. As Plato noted long ago, it tends to waver, to come and go, especially when concerned with the more abstract and ultimate issues of life.<sup>2</sup> And that in turn makes character and action based on those beliefs hesitant and variable at best, unsuited us for steady engagement with the realities (and disengagement from the nonrealities) that we have to deal with. Steadiness in belief and practice then comes to depend upon mere

willpower, often taking the form of encrusted close-mindedness or harsh dogmatism. Belief and practice are sustained at great price, if at all. The isolation of faith from knowledge is, accordingly, one major source of the painful difference between what people profess and how they act that is so frequently seen in Christian circles—but, to be accurate, also in humanity at large. This is often thought of as a failure of will or sincerity, but in fact it goes much deeper—it is a matter of whether will and choice are founded on knowledge or the lack of it.

This difficulty is not to be overcome by cultivating or manipulating feeling and emotions, by the practice of ritual or art, or by *trying harder* to believe and act as we think we should. “Just put your hands over your eyes and believe,” as some have said. Nor is it overcome by miraculous injections of divine inspiration and upholding from time to time. All of these may have some place. But the problems created by belief *without* knowledge, or belief in *opposition* to knowledge cannot be dealt with in such ways. *Belief cannot reliably govern life and action except in its proper connection with knowledge and with the truth and evidence knowledge involves.*<sup>3</sup>

But, we now are bound to ask, is it *possible* to know the things you believe as a Christian? To what extent? And does it really matter whether you do or not? Doesn't Christian faith automatically relegate you to an intellectual slum? Many—religious or not—deeply feel that it does. Some even think you should be proud of the slum. That is the status history has managed to hang upon faith. The relationship of religion to knowledge has become severely misunderstood and distorted over the last two centuries. In particular, it has become the accepted view that religion *stands free* of knowledge, that it requires only faith or commitment. In some quarters great faith has become equated with a belief or commitment that manages to sustain itself, with great effort, *against* knowledge—or at least with no support from knowledge. Faith is then regarded as essentially a kind of struggle. Some

speak of the “lonely person of faith” as an admirable but odd manifestation of heroic willpower.

In fact, such an interpretation of faith is only one part of the larger contemporary picture in which life and action are seen as fundamentally irrational—totally governed by feelings, traditions, force, “willpower,” and *blind* commitment. The significance of this picture for our contemporary life as a whole is profound. Like gravity in the physical realm, that picture pervasively influences and guides our thinking and acting—even without any specific awareness of it. In religion its effect upon practice is to restrict the foundation of devotion to will and feelings, with no thought that it is based, wholly or in part, upon knowledge of how things really are. In the social context it leads to mutual incomprehension between disagreeing parties, the inability to seek or find common ground, and suspicion, fear, contempt, and hostility. These are now the persistent undertone of our society and especially of its political discourse, frequently involving religion.

This encompassing outlook on the Christian faith has never been better expressed than by the leading character, Charles Ryder, in Evelyn Waugh’s novel *Brideshead Revisited*:

The view implicit in my education was that the basic narrative of Christianity had long been exposed as a myth, and that opinion was now divided as to whether its ethical teaching was of present value, a division in which the main weight went against it; religion was a hobby which some people professed and others not; at the best it was slightly ornamental, at the worst it was the province of “complexes” and “inhibitions”—catchwords of the decade—and of the intolerance, hypocrisy, and sheer stupidity attributed to it for centuries. No one had ever suggested to me that these quaint observances expressed a coherent philosophic system and intransigent historical claims; nor, had they done so, would I have been much interested.<sup>4</sup>

Within the context of such an outlook, individuals with standing in a particular professional field sometimes feel free, or even obligated, to cloak themselves in the authority of their area of expertise and make grandiose statements such as this by a professor of biological sciences:

Let me summarize my views on what modern evolutionary biology tells us loud and clear. . . . There are no gods, no purposes, no goal-directed forces of any kind. There is no life after death. When I die, I am absolutely certain that I am going to be dead. That's the end for me. There is no ultimate foundation for ethics, no ultimate meaning to life, and no free will for humans, either.<sup>5</sup>

Logically viewed, this statement is simply laughable. Nowhere within the published, peer-reviewed literature of biology—even *evolutionary* biology—do *any* of the statements of which the professor is “absolutely certain” appear as valid conclusions of sound research. One trembles to think that an expert in the field would not know this or else would feel free to disregard it. Biology as a field of research and knowledge is not even *about* such issues. It simply does not deal with them. They do not fall within the province of its responsibilities. Yet it is very common to hear such declamations about the state of the universe offered up in lectures and writing by specialists in certain areas who have a missionary zeal for their personal causes.

Responsibility to logic and truth has slowly disappeared from our academic and intellectual worlds, over the last century, in response to the pressures of “mass education” and the increasing dominance of “experts.” Aristotle, fairly viewed as the originator of the science of logic—though by no means one who brought it to completion—understood that “an educated man should be able to form a fair off-hand judgment as to the goodness or badness of the method used by a professor in his exposition. To be educated

is in fact to be able to do this; and even the man of universal education we deem to be such in virtue of his having this ability.”<sup>6</sup>

People in the contemporary world rarely understand this any longer and are prepared to accept, or at least not to question, whatever an “expert” or “professor” says, especially if it matches up with what they *want* to be true or with what is fashionable. This is one of the sad effects of what is called “mass education” and especially, at this point, “mass higher education.”

Around the middle of the last century C. S. Lewis, through his master devil, Screwtape, spoke of a “time the humans still knew pretty well when a thing was proved and when it was not; and if it was proved they really believed it. They still connected thinking with doing and were prepared to alter their way of life as the result of a chain of reasoning.” No more! “What with the weekly press and other such weapons, we have largely altered that,” Screwtape continues. He goes on to chide his underdevil, Wormwood, for trying to use *argument* to keep his “patient” from the Enemy’s (God’s) clutches. “Jargon, not argument, is your best ally in keeping him from the Church. Don’t waste time trying to make him think that materialism is *true*! Make him think it is strong or stark or courageous—that it is the philosophy of the future. That’s the sort of thing he cares about.” (Today, no doubt, we could substitute that it is “scientific” or the result of “research.”) Screwtape goes on to warn Wormwood that “by the very act of arguing, you awake the patient’s reason; and once it is awake, who can foresee the result?”<sup>7</sup>

Lewis, I think, could hardly have imagined where the tendency toward “slogans,” which he notes, would have come by now. Today Christians and non-Christians alike stand within an intellectual atmosphere where politically dominated authority is the primary force at work, and almost no one any longer knows the meaning or application of *Non sequitur*, “It does not follow” (i.e., it is an unwarranted conclusion or assertion). An understanding of ordinary logic is no longer a required part of uni-



versity degree programs, as was almost universally the case sixty years ago. Now, as a result, our world is full of uneducated people with higher degrees. They have no independent logical judgment and simply conform to what their circle takes to be the “best professional opinion.” Thankfully, there are rare exceptions.

The implications of this are ominous and vast for all of us. In what follows I am mainly concerned about the harmful effects of this smothering outlook upon sincere Christians. Make no mistake about it, it is an outlook that undermines the spiritual life of those who would follow Jesus Christ. These people usually get, whether they want it or not, precisely the “education” that Waugh’s character mentions and that our professor of biological sciences proclaims as obvious; but they also long to live the life they see in Jesus himself and in his followers at their best. Such an “education” and such a life are inconsistent. They cannot inhabit the same person. *A life of steadfast discipleship to Jesus Christ can be supported only upon assured knowledge of how things are, of the realities in terms of which that life is lived.* As in any arena of real life where knowledge is essential, infallibility is not required, of course, and numerous things to which ordinary Christians (or even lengthy traditions) have subscribed could be erroneous or, so far as their knowledge extends, groundless. Still, a steady life directed, in a communal setting, toward the good and right *can be supported only within a framework of basically sound knowledge and understanding.* This does not fundamentally change when we come to religion. Indeed, there it is more important than ever.

My hope here is to enable intellectually serious people, Christians or not, to understand the *indispensable role of knowledge in faith and life.* I also want to make it clear that *there is a body of uniquely Christian knowledge,* one that is available to all who would appropriately seek it and receive it—again, whether Christians or not. Like all knowledge of any complexity and depth, that body of knowledge does not jump down one’s throat, and no one can force it upon another. It has to be welcomed to be

possessed. And because, in this case, it is essentially a *knowledge of persons*, it has the special characteristics and makes the special demands upon the knower peculiar to that kind of knowledge. But it is available, and available *as knowledge*, to those of normal human abilities who seek it in ways suited to its subject matter. When understood and accepted as knowledge, it is objectively testable—again, in ways suitable to its subject matter—and it lays a foundation for action and character that is unequalled for human good.

Though my main concern is for the unwarranted burden sincere Christians and Christian teachers find themselves under in the contemporary world of educational thought and practice, knowledge and the will to know, by their very nature, place one in the *common arena of human life*, in the “public square,” as is now said. That is one of the most important things about knowledge and the effort to know. It provides a meeting place for all who love and respect their neighbors. It encourages us to listen as well as speak, to learn as well as teach. Knowledge opens up possibilities and imposes responsibilities in the public arena. It is no longer just a matter of “my stuff” against “your stuff.” When we step into its arena there is suddenly a “we” and an “ours.” Instead of automatic deadlock, there is the possibility of joint inquiry. So, as I write here, I am speaking to every person and responsible to every person.

For most of Western history, the basic claims of the Christian tradition have in fact been regarded by its proponents *as knowledge of reality*, and they were presented as such. You cannot understand the history of the European peoples unless you understand that. Indeed, a similar point is to be made of *all* religions and their cultures. Religion as actually lived, not as some figment of the academic imagination, always claims to involve knowledge of *how things are*. That is of the nature of religion. One cannot seriously imagine the Buddha, for example, presenting his teachings merely as his sentiments, guesses, “personal commitments,” or a “leap of faith.” Nor did those who heard him and followed him

understand him in that way. They understood him as conveying a true picture of profound realities, and as doing so on the basis of knowledge he had gained from his thought and experiences.<sup>8</sup>

The same is true of Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and teachers from farther east. Contemporary teachers and leaders in religion may not put things that way. But you will notice they also do not have the power and influence of those who founded their religion. If the founders had spoken as they do today, the corresponding religions simply would not be here.

It is one of the curiosities of Western intellectual history that, during the last century or so, those with no serious involvement with practical Christianity—maybe totally ignorant of it or even hostile to it—have been allowed, under the guise of “scholarship” or innovative thought, to define what religion is and to reinterpret Christian teachings in the light of their own biased definitions and purposes. This is now built into our educational system. Then, quite naturally, religion turns out to be something resting upon anything but knowledge, for if it turned out to be a matter of knowledge of reality, then our scholars, as “men and women of science and rationality,” would have to accept the knowledge and reality involved or else be counted as irrational themselves. Thus they present religion as an irrational projection or development of some sort—contrary to the inner nature of the religious consciousness itself.<sup>9</sup>

That approach is often combined today with the thought that the basic teachings of Christianity—the existence of a personal God, his intervention and direction in human affairs, the spiritual nature of human beings, the fundamental reliability of the Bible and the central teachings of the church, and so forth—*have been discovered* to be false or without credible evidence. In short, Christianity has been “found out,” and it is at best only a set of humanly contrived myths and traditions, if not an outright fraud. Many who have standing as scholarly spokespeople for Christianity promote that view.

Though the task of this book is to deal at length with main points involved in this general, secularist outlook, let us say immediately that the developments of modern thought *have not shown* the substance of Christian teaching to be false or groundless. There have been many discoveries, to be sure, but none producing that result, or even close. Modern discoveries, therefore, have *not* shown that Christianity's central teachings do not or cannot form *a body of knowledge* accessible to capable and responsible inquirers. Certainly the currently prevailing myth of intellectual and academic life is that this *has* been shown. But myth making, as it turns out, is not the sole prerogative of religion. It is also a very active secular and academic pastime—and a human one as well; perhaps it is some kind of human necessity.

But, as we have noted, problems with the relationship between knowledge and Christian teachings and practice are posed not just by those who oppose Christianity or religion, but by those who advocate it. Religious people in the Western world now tend to be uneasy or suspicious about knowledge; they no longer see it as a friend, but, more likely, as an enemy. We begin, therefore, with some highly necessary clarifications of connections between knowledge and life. We hope to show the way in which *knowledge is a friend of faith*, essential to faith and to our relationship with God in the spiritual life.

I SHOULD ALERT readers to the fact that this is not a devotional book and that it will require considerable mental effort to understand. This lies in the nature of the problems to be dealt with. I have tried to ease the pain as much as possible. One result of the displacement of faith from knowledge, which we are dealing with in this book, is that many people now believe you do not need to think deeply and carefully to follow Christ. C. S. Lewis makes a very penetrating comment about this matter:

God has room for people with very little sense, but He wants everyone to use what sense they have. The proper motto is not “Be good, sweet maid, and let who can be clever,” but “Be good, sweet maid, and don’t forget that this involves being as clever as you can.” God is no fonder of intellectual slackers than of any other slackers. If you are thinking of becoming a Christian, I warn you you are embarking on something which is going to take the whole of you, brains and all. . . . One reason why it needs no special education to be a Christian is that Christianity is an education itself.<sup>10</sup>

ONE

# Can Faith Ever Be Knowledge?

For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

PAUL, 2 CORINTHIANS 4:6

ARE THE CENTRAL teachings of the Christian tradition things that can be *known* to be true if appropriately examined? Are they possible subjects of *knowledge*? Are there people who actually do know them to be true? Or are they things you can only *believe* or choose to *commit* yourself to, perhaps only *profess*? And does it really matter one way or the other? If so, why?

Consider just the Apostles' Creed:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell. The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God, the Father Almighty. From thence he

shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.

This creed is widely regarded and used among Christians as an expression of belief or faith—and possibly of mere commitment or profession where genuine belief is lacking but wanted. But can we also *know* that what is expressed in these beliefs is true and real? And does it matter whether we know what they express or not? Wouldn't it be enough to just believe them? That is often suggested. Mere belief as a heroic act—or even as the result of a miracle—might warrant God's favor.

Of course, we can fail to know the articles of the creed—no doubt about that—and many people do. Just as someone might, for lack of appropriate application, fail to know the multiplication tables, the order of succession of American presidents, or the capital cities of the fifty states. If we don't know those things, however, it is because of an omission on our part. We might believe them without knowing them, of course, but we also can come to know them if we make a point of it. With that everyone agrees. Not knowing them says nothing about the possibility or impossibility of knowledge of them, or about the advantages of knowing them instead of only believing them or being totally ignorant of them. Could the same be true of the Apostles' Creed? Could it be true of the other central teachings of the Christian tradition?

These are important questions for how we live our lives. Almost everyone today is prepared to say that those teachings of Christianity *cannot* be things we know and that, in this respect, they are like the teachings of *every* religion. We in the United States live under a social consensus that seems to require such a response. According to it, the teachings of religion are not possible subjects of knowledge. But we must not accept this conclusion without question, for its implications are of profound importance.

They place the teachings of religion at a crushing disadvantage before all that passes for knowledge in our world. They relegate them to practical irrelevance and loosen any grip they might otherwise have on the understanding and direction of life. Is that really justified? Or is it a terrible mistake? The difference between belief and knowledge is huge and affects every area of life. Not having knowledge of the central truths of Christianity is certainly one reason for the great disparity between what Christians profess and how they behave—a well-known and disturbing phenomenon.

#### KNOWLEDGE, BELIEF, COMMITMENT, AND PROFESSION

We must begin to rethink these matters by reflecting on what knowledge is. What is it to know, to possess knowledge of a certain subject matter? We cannot here plumb this question to its depths, but a working idea, derived from how we actually deal with knowledge in real life, is this: *We have knowledge of something when we are representing it (thinking about it, speaking of it, treating it) as it actually is, on an appropriate basis of thought and experience.* Knowledge involves truth or accuracy of representation, but it must also be truth based upon adequate evidence or insight. The evidence or insight comes in various ways, depending on the nature of the subject matter. But it must be there.

Knowledge in this sense is what we require in service people, professionals, and leaders. We expect them to *know* what they are doing, to be right, but *not* just by guessing or luck. We might occasionally accept luck in an automobile mechanic—far less so in a brain surgeon or a government official—but even then only if it comes in a context of solid knowledge and steady practice based on it. Those professionals must not *count on* luck. You would not take your car to a shop that advertised itself as being lucky in making repairs. Luck cannot be the *modus operandi*. Knowledge



brings truth and correctness under reliable control. That is what we need and want in real life, and what we regularly have. But how does that differ from belief?

*Belief*, by contrast, has no necessary tie to truth, good method, or evidence. We can believe what is false and often do. Belief may arise from many sources. Children and others “catch” beliefs from those around them. Emotions such as fear, hatred, or love give rise to beliefs. In its basic nature belief is a matter of *tendencies to act*. It has a certain feeling tone to it in some cases, but to believe something involves a readiness to act, in appropriate circumstances, *as if* what is believed were so. Thus belief involves the will in a way that knowledge does not. If I believe I am low on gas, I will have an eye out for a gas station and be ready to turn in and fill up if things seem right. If I believe I have plenty of fuel, on the other hand, my thoughts, feelings, tendencies, and behaviors will be characteristically different. But of course I could be wrong either way and *still* believe. My fuel gauge may have gone crazy, or my friend, who loaned me the car, may have misinformed me about the need for fuel.

Similarly, if I really do believe in God, I will tend to act as if he exists. If I believe that the Bible and the church are unique sources of reliable information about life and well-being, I will tend to honor them and give them careful attention, making them a part of my life. If I believe they are not, I will avoid them or even attack them.

But what about commitment? Is it the same as belief? Not at all. *Commitment*, made so much of today in religion and in life, need not involve belief, much less knowledge. You can commit yourself to something you don’t even believe. Commitment is simply a matter of choosing and implementing a course of action. We have that ability. It is part of what humans can do. Sometimes we have to act when we “don’t know what to do” or even when we have no belief concerning what would be best. Time and circumstance are passing. A person lost in a

forest may have no idea of which direction to take, but commit in action to one particular direction because the person knows or believes he or she must do *something*. Or an investment must be made *now*, for example, or a relationship engaged in. We then commit ourselves to a course of action, because we must do something. Or perhaps, on rare occasion, we wish to be arbitrary, to just have a fling and see what happens. That is how we board a roller coaster.

At an even greater distance from knowledge is *profession*. Sometimes people *profess* to believe things they are not even committed to. They may do this just to fit into a social setting. Throughout history, and in some places still today, professing to believe things they don't believe, or even things they are committed against, has been the only way for people to save their lives or avoid great harm. This was true of Jews and Muslims in Spain at one time and is true for Christians in many parts of our world today. Professing to believe has, sadly, played a large role in the *practice* of religion. It has profoundly stained our understanding of what religion is. Some people seem to profess belief in God "just in case" there is a God. But they neither are committed to nor believe in the idea that God exists.

#### WHY KNOWLEDGE MATTERS

With these distinctions before us, we can see how important the answer is to the question of whether religious or other teachings are subjects of knowledge. It makes a huge difference in the conduct of life and for human well-being. *Knowledge, but not mere belief or commitment, confers on its possessor an authority or right—even a responsibility—to act, to direct action, to establish and supervise policy, and to teach.* Circumstances will modify this from case to case, but it is in general true. Knowledge also confers upon belief and action a stability and communicability that other sources of action do not. This is because knowledge involves

truth: truth secured by experience, method, and evidence that is generally available.

And that explains why we want leaders, professionals, and others we rely upon to *know* what they are doing, not just to believe or feel strongly about it. We trust them on the assumption or the hope that they know their area of expertise, even if we are mistaken about them in a given case. Beliefs, commitments, feelings, traditions, and power do *not* confer on them the same right and authority as knowledge does, even if those things sometimes happen to coincide with a correct outcome. We are still aware that those sources of action might have been wrong and that they lack any basis that ensures their rightness—especially, any basis that can be shared and openly evaluated in fair inquiry by those affected. Clearly, our belief (trust, confidence, faith) in those who guide or help us assumes that they have knowledge. If they lack the knowledge assumed, they are disqualified, even if they remain in a position of service or power.

It is a mistake to think of belief simply as knowledge *manqué*, as something that falls short of knowledge or is deficient knowledge. Belief does not “turn into” knowledge, though we sometimes come to know what we previously only believed. Rather, *belief and knowledge are different kinds of things with different roles in life*. Belief does not necessarily disappear when knowledge comes. Of two people who share a belief, one can also know what they both believe, and the other not. This is typical of teachers and students or of experts and nonexperts in a given area. Certainly we often believe what we do not, and perhaps cannot, know. We would be in a pretty pickle if we could not do that, for knowledge is not always available to guide action when we need it. But it is less widely recognized that *we sometimes do not believe what we know*. For example, most people who enter the lottery know they will not win. They will not win, and they have good evidence that they will not. They may refuse to consider the evidence or to hold it before their mind. Yet they are prepared to

*act as if* they might win. In wagering they are irrational and irresponsible. Human life is full of such self-delusions.

And that explains why gambling is morally wrong. It is not a morally admirable practice, but just the opposite. Rational and responsible persons will not do it. (We have a duty to be rational. It is a virtue.) And it also explains why the gambling industry presents itself as “entertainment.” It wants to disguise what it really is. When you gamble, according to it, you are just “enjoying yourself” or having a fling. But rational and responsible people are those who strive to base their beliefs and actions upon their knowledge.

We must not overlook this when thinking about the relationship between knowledge and belief, and between knowledge and Christian faith. It is desirable to base our beliefs on knowledge wherever possible. Knowledge stabilizes true belief and makes it more effectual for good as well as more accessible and shareable. We cannot understand this if we are thinking of belief as only a preliminary to knowledge, one that disappears when knowledge arrives. Ideally, knowledge is the basis of belief, and, when it is, it gives the belief a very different bearing upon life. *Knowledge is a basis for belief*, the very best basis, but belief is not a basis for knowledge or even a constituent of it. Thus we come by the idea of mere “head knowledge”—it is knowledge without belief, and perhaps it is mere profession.

#### RELIGION ALWAYS PRESENTS ITSELF AS BASED ON KNOWLEDGE

The central teachings of the Christian religion, such as those of the Apostles’ Creed, were from the beginning presented and accepted as knowledge—knowledge of what is real and what is right.<sup>1</sup> That is why they had the transforming effect they did on a world dead set against them. Indeed, the biblical tradition as a whole presents itself, rightly or wrongly, as one of *knowledge of*

God. Then, within that overarching context of knowledge, there do arise specific occasions of faith and commitment to action extending beyond what is known, but still conditioned upon the knowledge of God. Consider the biblical stories. When, for example, Abraham left his homeland and went out “not knowing” where he was going, he did so *because* of his knowledge of God and of God’s constant care in his life. He did not do it wondering whether God existed or was with him. The same was true of his willingness to offer up his son Isaac. The very ground of his actions in faith without specific knowledge was precisely overarching knowledge of his God, who spoke to him and acted in his life.

The same is true of Moses when he went in faith to deliver the Israelites from slavery, and of David when he went into battle against Goliath. Moses, according to the texts, is given conclusive evidence that God is with him—evidence he also can present to others (Exod. 3–4). David actually cites, to those who doubted his ability, the experiences and the knowledge that enabled him to believe he could conquer the giant (1 Sam. 17:34–37). Over and over in the Old Testament the explanation of events in human history is that humans may *know* that Jehovah is the living God.<sup>2</sup> *An act of faith in the biblical tradition is always undertaken in an environment of knowledge and is inseparable from it.*

We can never understand the life of faith seen in scripture and in serious Christian living unless we drop the idea of faith as a “blind leap” and understand that faith is commitment to action, often beyond our natural abilities, *based upon knowledge of God and God’s ways*. The romantic talk of “leaping,” to which we in the Western world have become accustomed, actually amounts to “leaping” *without* faith—that is, with no genuine belief at all. And that is actually what people have in mind today when they speak of a “leap of faith.”

The biblical stories know absolutely nothing of blind “leaps of faith,” as that phrase is now understood. Such “leaps” are a pure

fantasy imposed upon those stories and upon the religious life by the prejudices and tortured turns of modern thought. The result has been to undermine the *foundations of faith in knowledge* and to leave the teachings of Jesus and his people (along with those of all other religions) hanging in the air, with no right or responsibility to direct human life. That also explains how many people can now say, "All religions are equal." What is meant is that all religions are equally devoid of knowledge and reality or truth. In fact, however, no known religions are the same; they teach and practice radically different things. You only have to look at them to see that. To say they are all the "same" is to disrespect them. It is a way of claiming that none really matter, that their distinctives are of no human significance.

Alvin Plantinga is one of the most highly regarded American philosophers of recent decades. In virtue of his research and publications, no one today has clearer insight into knowledge and belief than he does. He rightly points out that knowledge is an essential element of Christian faith, and he dismisses the common assumption that one can only believe that God exists, but cannot know it. He remarks: "The Bible regularly speaks of *knowledge* in this context—not just rational or well-founded belief. Of course, it is true that the believer has *faith*—faith in God, faith in what He reveals—but this by no means settles the issue. The question is whether he doesn't also *know* that God exists. Indeed, according to the Heidelberg Catechism, knowledge is an essential element of faith, so that one has true faith that *p* only if he knows that *p*."<sup>3</sup>

The language of the New Testament documents is starkly clear on the centrality of knowledge to following Jesus. It even defines or describes *eternal life* as knowledge. Jesus speaks of the eternal kind of life he brings to his people: "And this is eternal life, that they may *know* you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3; cf. 1 John 1:1–5; 2:3; 4:7–8, 13). We shall have much more to say later on about this knowledge that

is the eternal kind of life. But for now we only recall the ringing declarations of Paul: “I want to *know* Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings” (Phil. 3:10; all emphases in scriptural quotations have been added), and “I *know* the one in whom I have put my trust” (2 Tim. 1:12). Or consider the carefully laid out passage in 2 Peter 1:2–3: “May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the *knowledge* of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the *true knowledge* of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.” Shortly afterward we are told to support our “goodness,” or virtue, with *knowledge*, as disciples of Jesus (v. 5). Then the admonition is given at the end of this letter to “grow in the grace and *knowledge* of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (3:18). The assumption is that we have knowledge of him and that it can and should continually grow. The book now in your hand is devoted to an examination of this assumption in the context of modern life and thought.

But what is true of Christianity in its inception and history is true of other religions as well. They all present themselves as providing *knowledge* of what is real and what is right. To think otherwise is to *falsify the very nature of religious consciousness and religious life* as well as the claims of the particular religions. If religions only called people to “faith” or commitment (or profession!) as those are now generally understood, they would have no claim whatsoever on the attention of humankind. Instead, they offer—whether they are right about it or not—knowledge of certain profound truths, and they call people to act on the basis of that knowledge.

The “enlightenment” of which Buddhists speak, for example, is offered as knowledge, as passing beyond the false beliefs and passions engulfing the usual human existence and grasping ultimate reality. The Buddha promises *knowledge of how things really are*. Your belief or “faith” is, after all, just a fact of little interest about you, but your *knowledge*, or claims thereto, puts you in a

larger context that involves the public. Indeed, one can hardly imagine a religion offering itself on the basis of mere belief or commitment. Why would anyone imagine such a thing? Well, as it turns out, there is a good answer to that question.

### THE STRUGGLE FOR THE WESTERN MIND

In the Western world, a great historical struggle between what might be called “traditional” knowledge, represented by the church, and modern knowledge, represented by science, has brought us to where many can only think of religion as *mere* belief or commitment. A significant part of what the traditional “Christian” authority in late medieval and early modern Europe presented as knowledge turned out not to be knowledge at all. Some of it was shown to be false by genuine advances in knowledge, and some of it was found to be based upon unreliable or questionable sources. A pervasive mood of rejection then arose. That mood became an intellectual and academic lifestyle and spread across the social landscape *as an authority in its own right*. It branded *all* traditional and religious “knowledge” as mere illusion or superstition and *all* of the sources of such knowledge as unreliable or even delusory. This mood came, *with no logical justification whatever*, to govern the world of Western thought, and you will see it today in the popular works of anti-Christian and antireligious writers. Over a period of time the status of “knowledge” came to be reserved, as a matter of definition, to the subject matters of mathematics and the “natural” sciences—and, questionably, to that of the “social” or “human” sciences as well.

We cannot tell that whole story here, but it brings us to where, rightly or wrongly, we stand today. Religion, and the Christian tradition in particular—because it was the form of religion that occupied the ground in Europe and North America—lost in the public mind its standing as a body of knowledge about what is real and what is right. It could no longer presume in society at



large to direct action, to formulate and supervise policy, and to teach its principles as knowledge of how things really are.

Now, you may think that that is too strongly stated. You may reply that we in the Western world extend to all religions the *right* to believe, speak, act, and teach what they please. But that is not really true, when you carefully examine the facts. And, with little if any exception, it is only a political and legal matter at best. It is not a concession publicly granted because religious teachings are regarded as possibly constituting a body of knowledge. And this is usually agreed to by Christians themselves. Even institutions of higher education that self-identify as Christian do not think of or present themselves as possessing a body of *knowledge* that secular schools do not have. They do not say that the secular schools lack knowledge of reality. They fear public disqualification from the knowledge and research game if they say that.

#### CHRISTIANS HAVE ACTUALLY ENCOURAGED FAITH WITHOUT KNOWLEDGE

In fact, the Christian churches generally not only *accepted* the elimination of their teachings from the domain of knowledge; they were also complicit in it and even encouraged it. With the burgeoning of modern and entirely secularized knowledge in the 1700s and 1800s, they over time conceded the field of knowledge to a totally secularized “science” and “research.” On the theological left, or “liberal” side, this was very largely a defensive move, designed to insulate Christian faith and practice from any possible negative impact of the results of scientific and historical studies. Liberal theology in its earlier periods made the essence of religion out to be a matter of inner experience, including, first, the moral life, which was said not to depend upon matters of historical or other “facts.” It later lost the “inner” emphasis entirely and became a version of what is now called “social ethics.” The famous gap between fact and value, so dear to the modern mind,

did heavy service here. Baruch Spinoza, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Gotthold Lessing, and many others lent their weight to divorcing religion and morality from the world of facts and knowledge.<sup>4</sup> In time, religion and morality became merely “political,” as they are now for most people. What is political, as now understood, does not require knowledge, but only advocacy. Its only issue is how to “win” for “your side.”

The same disconnection of faith from knowledge was achieved on the theological right or “conservative” side of Christian institutions, though upon a different principle. Here knowledge was classed as “works” or as the result of merely human effort. It was opposed to the miraculous work of “grace,” which was supposed to produce belief (“faith”) *without* human knowledge or even in opposition to it. You are saved by grace through faith, as the apostle Paul famously said, and the faith was a *gift* of God, not a result of human effort, in order that no one would be in position to boast of his or her superiority (Eph. 2:8–9).<sup>5</sup> Knowledge was pushed away as inessential to saving faith, having nothing to do with it. There was no thought that such faith, though still a gift, might actually involve knowledge as an essential part or support, or that knowledge too could be a gift of God without losing its inner character *as* knowledge, possibly even a gift essential to the gift of faith.

So in the recent past Christian leaders and institutions of one stripe or another have abandoned knowledge to the secular mind and even promulgated the idea that if you knew something, you could not have faith in it. That is often said now and in fact has become the usual approach. Never mind that our lives are full of things we both believe *and* know, and that we even believe most things we do believe *because* we know them. We justifiably regard people who in ordinary life believe things they don’t know with some caution. And we ordinarily want and expect people to believe things they do know, if at all possible.

The American Quaker theologian Elton Trueblood, some years ago, quoted Kirsopp Lake’s definition: “Faith is not belief

in spite of evidence, but life in scorn of consequences.” Then he adds: “*Faith*, as the plain man knows, is *not belief without proof, but trust without reservations*.”<sup>6</sup> This loads a bit too much onto faith, to be honest about it, for faith certainly allows for some reservations. Still, Trueblood was moving in the right direction. Faith has to do with engagement of the will, as we have noted, and not with absence of knowledge—which may come or go in various ways along with engagement of the will.

#### TOLERANCE REJECTS KNOWLEDGE?

Another line of influence pushing religion and faith out of the range of knowledge has to do with tolerance, or with its opposite, persecution. There has arisen the idea that if you think you *know* what your religion holds to be true, as distinct from merely believing, being committed to, or professing it, you will be *certain*—you will have no doubt about what your religion teaches. That in turn will, supposedly, make a bigot of you; you will be close-minded, dogmatic, arrogant, and high-handed. You will treat “infidels” badly, for they will in your eyes deserve no better. You may then deprive them of their goods, torture them, or even kill them. People who *know* they are right, it is said, are intolerant, and when in power, they are dangerous.

There is some *apparent* historical warrant to this view, but is the problem really knowledge, or is it something else? Possibly the *lack* of appropriate knowledge? And can the solution to the problem of intolerance really lie in denying knowledge, especially with respect to the things that matter most to many human beings, religion and morals? If we can just treat religion and morals as areas in which there is no knowledge, the proposal is, we will have pulled the rug out from under dogmatism, intolerance, and persecution. They will then disappear. Well, one can only say that that is a pretty shallow analysis of the problem of intolerance. Intolerant people often claim “absolute” knowledge,

but that does not mean you can get rid of intolerance by disallowing knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

This line of thinking about tolerance and knowledge has become routine in elite cultural circles, however. It is a major part of what lies behind the elevation of tolerance to the level of the few primary virtues recognized today.<sup>8</sup> Several years ago the scientist and intellectual historian Jacob Bronowski produced a television series and a book called *The Ascent of Man*. In the eleventh episode and chapter, he dealt with the great harm done by those who think they know. Supposedly, the harm is done just *because* they think they know. At the end of the episode he strides out into the ash pond at Auschwitz, squats down, and scoops up a handful of mud. "This," he says, "is where people were turned into numbers. Into this pond were flushed the ashes of some four million people. And that was not done by gas. It was done by arrogance. It was done by dogma. It was done by ignorance. When people believe that they have absolute knowledge, with no test in reality, this is how they behave. This is what men do when they aspire to the knowledge of the gods."<sup>9</sup>

There are points here well worth making, but the recommended solution to the problem is to make all "knowledge" tentative, that is, to hold it only if it is open to further testing and critical reflection. That is surely a good idea, for a little knowledge is proverbially a dangerous thing, and knowledge is *never* complete, as the apostle Paul pointed out (1 Cor. 8:2). But Bronowski and others have associated openness and humility about knowledge only with science and scientific knowledge. Other knowledge claims, especially those of religion and morality, are thought by them to have no test in reality and therefore no check on the certainty with which they are held. So claims to knowledge in these other areas must be rejected, they think, and this can be done by simply restricting knowledge to scientific knowledge. That is their solution. Once again, then, religion and Christian beliefs are eliminated from the domain of knowledge.

Faith cannot be “knowledge” or be certified by “knowledge,” it is held. But with that it loses the rights, authority, and power over life that are always reserved for knowledge and that are not applicable to mere belief or commitment. No doubt that was, after all, what was wanted by some.

#### DISOWNING KNOWLEDGE LEADS TO TOLERANCE?

Bronowski certainly regarded himself as expressing moral, though perhaps not religious, knowledge—as not just making a “leap of faith”—when he presses for the elimination of “absolute” knowledge. Certainly he is not expressing a conclusion of any science known to humankind. And it is fair to ask how one can stand against arrogance and intolerance and persecution *except on the basis of* knowledge. Is that not what he is doing—resting his case on what he knows? What else is possible? He certainly did not think he was just expressing his own personal belief or commitment. And is it not true that the brightest examples of people who stand *against* arrogance and intolerance are, for the most part, those who stand on the basis of what they take to be religious and moral knowledge? Wasn’t that true of most of those who *did* oppose Hitler and his ash pond? And, just for the record, those who did *not* oppose Hitler usually blamed it, precisely, on *lack* of knowledge: “We did not know this was being done!”

Also, it is not obvious, to say the least, that those who have abandoned religious and moral knowledge are *more* tolerant and less inclined to arrogance and cruelty than those who adhere to it. Human beings routinely assume superiority on many grounds other than possession of knowledge. The sad truth is that people can be just as arrogant from belief, commitment, various associations, or simple egotism as from claimed knowledge. Do we actually find more humility and tolerance, with respect to the things that really matter to them, in those who reject the possibility of religious knowledge than in those who accept religious knowledge?

What are the empirical facts here, and where are the studies that establish them? Let's be "scientific" about *that*.

Tolerance is not indifference, but a generous regard and even provision for those who differ from us on points we deeply care about. To support tolerance—which is not the same as lacking intolerance—more is required than just a lack of certainty concerning differences at issue. We must also care about people. Genuine tolerance itself must be based upon assured knowledge of what is real and what is right. And it always is. It is not a "leap of faith." Tolerance is not the lack of something, but the expression of a positive vision of what is good and right, a vision taken to be solidly grounded in knowledge of how things really are. It has often been considered knowledge that all human beings are equally loved by God, and the call to tolerance was based on that knowledge. It was this type of vision, regarded as knowledge, that led to the abolition of slavery and legal segregation, for example. Such a vision, held as knowledge of how things really are, undergirds the possibility of a neighbor love that comes from the heart and reaches across all human differences.

#### KNOWLEDGE IS ALWAYS POLITICAL

But it is right—in fact it is knowledgeable—to be concerned about the effects of knowledge and claims to knowledge. They have huge influence, for good or ill, on human life and well-being. It is not just that "knowledge is power," in the sense of power to manipulate physical, social, and psychological processes. It is also *political* power—power to lead and influence people, institutions, and governments. We are right to be wary of those who claim to know. The most horrid of cults and totalitarian systems of government always rest upon claims to have special knowledge, whatever else may be involved. Consider the political ideologies of the twentieth century as well as the more limited but death-dealing cults of the present day.

Knowledge is *always* political, not in its nature or what it is—you can't know by voting or counting votes—but in its *effects*. Of course, if it concerns something utterly trivial, it will not be political, for who then cares? But otherwise it will tend to determine political and legal powers and processes. From our biblical stories, once again, Joseph (Gen. 41:38–49) and Daniel (Dan. 2:46–49) were lifted from the level of slaves to high positions in government simply because they exhibited important knowledge. The struggle of the Christian movement to emerge from Judaism was a struggle over who had knowledge of God and God's will and intentions. The internal conflicts and developments of particular religions are nearly *always* a matter of who has knowledge of essential matters.

That knowledge, and perhaps religious knowledge above all, is political follows from the relationship it has to truth, method, evidence, and life, briefly described above. Because it confers upon the possessor the right and responsibility to act, direct action, set and supervise policy, and teach, it cannot *not* be political. This becomes apparent when we observe the inner circle of advisers of rulers and leaders. Kings, presidents, and executive officers at higher levels gather around themselves advisers who have a reputation for knowledge of affairs. They do this in the hope of leading and directing in terms of knowledge and thereby being successful with their undertakings. In a democratic system, the issue of "Who knows?" becomes a point of constant agitation and strife, because so many people think they *know* and that they should therefore have a voice. Consequently, elected officials and policy makers are constantly having to rally support and defend themselves and their ideas. It is invariably a battle over who *knows* what is going on and what should be done, *not* about who has beliefs or commitments.

This helps us appreciate why, in Western societies and especially in America, there is such a huge drive to *rule* religion and Christian institutions and teachings *out of the domain of knowledge*.

By that move religion is stripped of the rights and responsibilities that always accompany knowledge and that would certainly increase its political influence. Secularism—itsself always posing *as* knowledge, usually by striving to associate itself with “science” and “research”—justifies itself in determining political and legal processes and outcomes by stepping outside what is regarded as religion.<sup>10</sup> Taking advantage of the historical process briefly outlined above, popular media presents faith as foolishness and certainly as ungrounded in knowledge and reality. This aids the secularist cause. The movie *The Miracle on 34th Street* portrays some Christmastime events involving those who do and those who do not “have faith” in Santa Claus. It describes faith as “believing what you know is not so.” In the television series *All in the Family*, the intellectual and moral slob Archie Bunker describes faith as “what you wouldn’t believe for your life if it wasn’t in the Bible.” At the end of a CNN special titled “What Is a Christian,”<sup>11</sup> the voice-over at the exit piously intones: “After all, if you’ve got truth, it’s not really faith at all.” That is how faith is automatically perceived today.

Harvard University recently reviewed its general education program. The Task Force on General Education issued its report, which included a “Reason and Faith” requirement. A distinguished Harvard professor, Steven Pinker, criticized the report for inadequately stressing the “ennobling nature of knowledge” of “how the world works.” He also thought the report assigned too much importance to “faith.” He objected to the very juxtaposition of the words “reason” and “faith,” for that “makes it sound like ‘faith’ and ‘reason’ are parallel and equivalent ways of knowing, and we have to help students navigate between them. But universities are about reason, pure and simple. Faith—believing something without good reasons to do so—has no place in anything but a religious institution, and our society has no shortage of these.”<sup>12</sup> The irony of these statements is glaring. The *identification* of faith with “believing something without good reasons to



do so” is a clear indication that the professor needs a good course in what faith is. And his statement that “universities are about reason, pure and simple” makes one wonder where he has been. Has he escaped committee duty? Does he not know how classes are routinely conducted? How academic decisions are routinely reached, how they almost always are dominated by careful consideration of whose *interests* are involved?

#### THE REAL SIGNIFICANCE OF “SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE”

Thinking of Christian faith as grounded in knowledge, and in some parts to *be* knowledge, is to bring oneself into conflict with some of the most basic assumptions of modern thought and to threaten the foundations of a painfully achieved compromise in social order, one that excludes religion from the domain of knowledge *in order to exclude it in other respects*. In the United States that social order is most visible in the phrase “separation of church and state.” There is, of course, a perfectly good and indispensable sense in which that language has application and should be zealously upheld. That is the sense of the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. But in general usage today, what it really means is that what religion teaches is not a matter of knowledge of reality. It is, rather, only a matter of what certain human groups have accepted as a part of their historical identity, and what (it is assumed) they are all too glad to force upon other groups and individuals as opportunity offers. If it were seriously imagined that the teachings of Christianity or other religions constituted a vital and irreplaceable knowledge of reality, there would be no more talk of the separation of church and state than there is of the separation of chemistry or economics and state.

Failure to grasp this point helps us understand one reason why so much of Islam seems incomprehensible to Westerners. Practitioners of Islam, and certainly its leaders and teachers, regard its

teachings as *knowledge* of what is real and what is right and good. Separation of “church” (Islam) and government would therefore amount, in their minds, to separation of mind and life from reality. Who could be in favor of that? Is there any way to retain a valid separation of church and state, as intended by our founding documents, without treating religion as groundless or even foolish belief and practice? We shall have to return to this question later. It actually poses one of the most difficult problems of contemporary life—one to which Christian knowledge and practice based on it offer a viable solution.

#### KNOWLEDGE IS NEVER SUFFICIENT

Knowledge *alone* is never enough for human life, of course. That is itself one part of genuine Christian knowledge. And by itself, apart from some adequate moral teaching and discipline (based, of course, upon knowledge), it always “puffs one up”—as the apostle Paul in his profound knowledge of knowledge pointed out (1 Cor. 8:1). Knowledge alone sets us up for a fall. It gives a sense of substance and fulfillment to the self and to society that is an illusion. Under this illusion of substance and sufficiency, it forgets, as that wise man Paul also pointed out, that we only know “in part” (1 Cor. 8:1–3; 13:8–12) and that, as the poet Alexander Pope said, “A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.” Christians know that our knowledge is *always* little. We rarely even have any idea of how much it leaves out. (It is this knowledge of knowledge that, along with genuine love of neighbor, enables one to avoid intolerance.) In applying what we know or think we know, the “law of unintended effects” comes into play. When we act with even the best of available knowledge, we really don’t know what the consequences will be. We use DDT to get rid of crop pests, for example, and eventually find out that we are also getting rid of brown pelicans and eagles and that the fish we eat are loaded with the poison.

“Scientific knowledge,” as that is now understood, will not solve these kinds of practical problems, though much good might occur if such knowledge were better used. Still, in no case can it provide the knowledge and wisdom of how to live or even of how to use the knowledge we have. That is, simply, not what it is about. The best physical, chemical, and other scientific knowledge will not tell us what to do and who to be.<sup>13</sup> You only have to examine it carefully to see that. If some think it might, they would be a great help to a needy world if they would just show how. But we need not wait for them to do that, for we constantly employ genuine knowledge that is not from any of the sciences, and we could not live an hour without it.

In what follows, with the appropriately broadened understanding of “knowledge” provided above, we will apply the Augustinian formula *faith seeking understanding* (Heb. 11:3).<sup>14</sup> Faith, indeed, is not the same thing as knowledge, and it arises in many ways, often independently of knowledge. But it is possible, and a very good thing, to have knowledge of the same things we have faith in. Knowledge strengthens faith, sometimes by allowing us to grasp an item of faith in such a way that it *also* becomes an item of knowledge. Knowledge also can and often has laid a foundation for faith. We do often believe things because we have come to know them, and that is an ideal condition of belief. On the other hand, faith commonly acts as a framework and guide for the development and use of knowledge. Neither is complete without the other.

In what follows we will attend to details and just see how it goes. In J. I. Packer’s well-chosen words, “I ask you for the moment to stop your ears to those who tell you there is no road to knowledge about God, and come a little way with me and see.”<sup>15</sup>