

of denominational success, and the purpose of the church's mission. If the essential purpose of the church is to cultivate significant interpersonal relationships, and this can only happen in relatively small groups, then the formation of such groups should be a high priority. In the case of large churches, those with hundreds or thousands of members, church can happen, so to speak, only with the formation of small groups, churches within the church.

Their conclusions also redirect the focus of attention when it comes to the church's mission. Some Christian traditions or organizations encourage a strong sense of global identity. They provide information about church members in various parts of the world, especially in places where the church is growing remarkably or where church members are facing serious challenges. And they emphasize the important role that official church leaders play in coordinating its various activities, clarifying its doctrines, and establishing uniform policies for the entire membership. What does not get much attention by comparison is just what these scholars maintain is vital to the church conceived as the body of Christ, namely, the development of strong relationships within local congregations. If Brown and Strawn are on the right track, something more is needed than the concept that the church is primarily a worldwide movement that is identified by a message that is conceived as a set of doctrinal convictions. A collection of individuals does not constitute the church if it is defined only by a unified organization, commonly held beliefs, and similar religious practices. Church truly exists, their observations indicate, only where there is genuine community, that is, only where there are groups of Christians who form close caring relationships.

Brown and Strawn do not provide a full-fledged ecclesiology, nor do they intend to. The interface between church and society, or between church and world, does not come up. Nor does the perplexing phenomenon of all the deeply felt and long-standing divisions within Christianity. We could go on. But what they offer as a very specific proposal, namely, that a biblically informed concept of the church must take into account the wholistic view that humans are physically embodied and socially embedded, is entirely successful.

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Clayton, Philip, and Steven Knapp. *The Predicament of Belief: Science, Philosophy and Faith*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. x + 184 pp. Hardcover, \$32.95.

What is the appropriate relation between the relative strength of the evidence that supports a religious belief and the degree of confidence with which the belief is held? In *The Predicament of Belief* Philip Clayton and Steven Knapp develop a carefully formulated response to this persistent question. The predicament of which they speak applies to those who find the claims of Christianity problematic from the standpoint of scientific and historical

investigation, and yet attractive, if not irresistible, from a personal standpoint. They argue that those who find themselves in this situation can continue to believe and still maintain their intellectual integrity.

Clayton and Knapp distinguish their own position from two contrasting alternatives. They want to embrace more of what Christians have traditionally affirmed than those who “may be minimalists in what they believe, but [. . .] maximalists in the confidence with which they believe it” (18)—a description that brings to mind the position of a neo-liberal theologian like Schubert M. Ogden, for whom theology has no final basis except our common human experience, a position that excludes a good many traditional Christian affirmations. At the same time, they differ with those who assent to a wide range of traditional Christian claims but are noticeably unconcerned with evidential considerations that would render them at all suspect—from fideists, for example.

So, while they embrace the commitment of liberal theology to render the contents of faith intelligible to the modern mind, they resist the liberal tendency to dismiss too quickly various Christian claims which the “modern mind” finds problematic.

These epistemological and doctrinal aspirations account for the most important features of their project. On the epistemological front, they formulate a highly differentiated view of rationality. And on the doctrinal front, they conclude that the central claims of Christian faith exhibit different degrees of credibility. What we have here, then, is a highly nuanced view of the way, or ways, in which believers today can be both responsive to the various challenges to their beliefs that arise in the modern world *and* faithful to the central Christian claims that continue to motivate and inspire them on a personal level—a position that Clayton and Knapp identify as “Christian minimalism.”

When it comes to *beliefs*, Clayton and Knapp find compelling reasons to affirm that infinite or ultimate reality is “not-less-than-personal” in nature, that human beings are related to that reality, and that one particular human being, namely, Jesus, plays a “uniquely authoritative role” in that relationship (136). In contrast, they “stop short of affirming a number of the most dramatic traditional claims,” in particular, those regarding miraculous divine intervention, Jesus’ bodily resurrection, and Jesus’ identity with one of three “Persons” constituting the divine reality (136-137). They are not emphatic in rejecting the latter, however, and they admit that their affirmations undergo significant revision.

Christian minimalism differs from traditional belief not only in the content of what is believed, but also in the manner in which one believes (148); and it is here, I believe, that Clayton and Knapp offer their most stimulating observations. They describe various ways in which religious believers—not just religious belief—can be intellectually responsible. In a chapter entitled “Doubt and Belief,” they argue that there are no fewer than six degrees or levels of rationality (111), which they variously describe as forming an epistemic scale (128), a typology of degrees of rational justification (115-

116), and “a sufficiently nuanced framework for assessing the rational status of belief” (118). Each level is characterized by two things: the relative strength of the evidence in favor of a belief and the relative confidence of the believer in the truth of her belief.

On level one, someone believes something and believes that it is endorsed by the relevant community of experts (RCE). On level two, a person believes something even though the community of experts does not, because she believes the community of experts is mistaken in rejecting it. On level three, she believes something which she does not expect the community of experts ever to accept, because her personal experiences make it reasonable for her to believe.

On the first three levels, the believer’s degree of conviction apparently remains constant even though the nature of the evidence changes. On levels four to six, however, this confidence noticeably declines.

On level 4, a person accepts a certain belief even though she does not expect the relevant community of experts ever to accept it, and is not sure herself that her experience provides enough evidence to justify the belief. Nonetheless, she finds the evidence sufficient to render the belief, if not rationally justified, then “rationally permissible.” On level five, the person discovers that she does not have good reasons to embrace a certain belief, and therefore no longer believes it, but nevertheless still *hopes* that it will turn out to be true. On level six, the person no longer believes something, or even hopes that it will turn out to be true, but still finds it helpful, or useful. But she may suspend her disbelief while worshiping with others, and she may have occasional moments of conviction.

Clayton and Knapp deserve credit for emphasizing the importance of what we might call “responsible belief.” Having good reasons for one’s beliefs, and knowing just what level of justification applies to those beliefs, is important. Our most important decisions should be based on reasons that we think are good ones (118), and we should realistically and humbly assess the strength of these reasons.

In addition, the authors perceptively acknowledge the difficulty of achieving and maintaining responsible belief and the even more subtle difficulty of assessing one’s level of belief. While responsible belief may be a worthy ideal, they seem to concede, in practical life it is almost impossible to realize. For one thing, there is no way for us to step outside our beliefs to compare them to reality itself (112). For another, human beings are not entirely, or even largely, rational. Some care about such things more than others, and among those who care, no one can cite a rational basis for everything she believes (111). And when it comes to assessing such a personal and urgent matter as one’s own religious belief, things are even more difficult (118).

Due to the varying degrees of justification for religious beliefs (111) and the multiple ways in which a rational agent can be committed to a particular religious claim (134), the life of faith is one of constant flux. People are likely to slide up and down the scale of rationality over the course of their

religious experience (120), and the inventory of their beliefs that acquire and lose justification may be constantly shifting. Indeed, it is quite possible that someone will “adhere more strongly” to a belief that has less justification, or is even irrational by her own standards, than to one that has more (120).

Another noteworthy feature of their discussion is the fact that Clayton and Knapp acknowledge the difference between what Stephen T. Davis calls public and private evidence. There is evidence that is available to any informed, reasonable person, and there is evidence that is accessible only to an individual herself. The stronger evidence may well be of the latter sort. As Clayton and Knapp observe, however, having private evidence is not the same as having no evidence at all. In their epistemic scheme, a belief may be responsible, a person may be justified in embracing it, even though it may rest on evidence that is accessible only to the individual herself, and not to an objective, disinterested observer.

Perhaps the most important qualification they attach to their stratification of belief is the concluding “reminder” that the epistemic “levels” they describe are really “just convenient points along a continuum,” and “for any individual believer, the location of any particular claim along that continuum is subject to revision in light of new arguments, new experiences, and new discoveries” (134-135).

Along with its helpful insights, *The Predicament of Belief* also raises several questions. Given the complexity of our beliefs and the varieties of justification, the expression “continuum” seems preferable to that of “levels,” which appears much more frequently. The latter sets up a hierarchy of rationality, according to which some types of justification are superior to others, with the result that beliefs may descend (119), decline (120), even fall (126) from higher to lower levels. In light of the root cognitive metaphor that “good is up,” and higher is better, the connotation is unavoidable that even though evidence of a distinctly personal nature may qualify as “rational,” it is decidedly inferior to evidence of a public nature.

But suppose we place the various forms of justification at different locations on more or less the same level. Instead of a hierarchical arrangement of rationality, or “rationalities,” therefore, I prefer that we place the various forms of justification at different locations on more or less the same level. This would allow us to regard beliefs that rely on different sorts of evidence—public *and* private evidence, for example—as equally responsible even though they derive from different sources. And it would allow people who hold a particular belief for different reasons to be equally rational in doing so.

Then, too, there is the role that private evidence plays in the lives of many believers. The paradigmatic figure that Clayton and Knapp have in mind, the person who finds herself in a predicament, seems to be someone who starts from a position of belief, encounters various reasons to doubt those beliefs, and then hopes to find enough evidence to retain them, if not in their original, then in modified form. My suspicion is that this underestimates the power of the initial experience of faith, which provides both the incentive for the believer to pursue this hope and often, in the final analysis, the decisive

evidence for her conviction. It may be that faith can weather the storms of doubt because it finds enough evidence of a public nature to dispel the doubts, or at least to defuse their power. But one may also find that the power of one's early experience, the private evidence that planted the seeds of faith to begin with, is sufficient to sustain it during the strongest intellectual gales.

The account Karl Rahner gives of his experience will sound familiar to many. "I find myself a believer and have not come upon any good reason for not believing. I was baptized and brought up in the faith, and so the faith that is my inheritance has also become the faith of my own deliberate choice, a real, personal faith."

Another reason to question the use of "levels" language with reference to different epistemic situations is that it seems to undervalue an essential characteristic of faith. As generally described, faith exhibits an "in spite of" quality. It involves trust in the absence of conclusive evidence or proof. Faced with overwhelming, or coercive, evidence, one would have no need—indeed, there would be no room—for faith. In that case, one's belief would simply be the product of the evidence. If one's embrace of certain beliefs involves faith, it seems, there must be a distance between what she affirms and what the evidence fully supports. What seems to be a relative deficiency from a purely epistemic standpoint therefore seems to be an essential feature of faith. If so, then the highest epistemic level in Clayton and Knapp's scheme is not necessarily superior to some of the other positions they describe.

Wolfhart Pannenberg's distinction between the "trusting certainty of faith" and "absolute theoretical certainty" may be helpful here. Because "faith lives from the truth of its foundations," it is entirely appropriate for us to assess the evidence that supports the claims of faith. But since true faith consists in the "total committal of one's existence in the act of trust," we distort the nature of faith if we seek to extend this theoretical credibility into "an absolute theoretical certainty."

However tempting it is to tweak their formulations, the fact remains that Clayton and Knapp provide a wonderfully nuanced account of responsible belief. I can't recall any discussion of religious epistemology that is more sensitive than theirs to the complex experience of those who find themselves grasped both by the power of religious commitment and the summons to intellectual responsibility. The authors have placed us all in their debt.

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Dunbar, S., Gibson L. J., and Rasi, H. M., eds., *Entrusted: Christians and Environmental Care*. Mexico: Adventus, 2013, x + 286 pp. Paper, \$19.95.

A range of environmental issues have increasingly challenged Christians to consider the appropriate balance between consumption and preservation of limited resources, given the declining condition of our sinful planet. *Entrusted* is a collection of 23 articles that offer concise yet comprehensive introductory responses to these pressing issues. Under the editorial leadership of Dunbar, Gibson, and Rasi, a group of authors with diverse backgrounds (including