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How to be a Good Believer: A Multifaceted Defense of Christian Belief

by

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Honors Thesis

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I. Introduction

In this paper I will argue that holding Christian beliefs is consistent with intellectual virtues. I must first clarify that holding Christian beliefs does not consist only in the affirmation of certain propositions like “God exists”. This is not to say that affirming certain doctrine is not essential to Christian belief, but this is only part of what it encompasses. When I refer to Christianity and Christian beliefs in this paper, I mean affirming basic religious propositions like “Jesus was the son of God”, but I also take certain practices to be part of Christian belief. For example, spiritual disciplines (practices like prayer, study of scripture, meditation, etc.) are a major facet of Christianity, as well as practices like involvement in a local community of other believers. While some accept that belief in a vague, higher power might be epistemically innocuous, they argue that to believe in the God described in the Christian faith is asking one to accept too many propositions not supported by reason¹. This view is misguided. I will argue that, on the contrary, one can believe in God and maintain the practices of Christianity while leading a rigorous life of the mind.

I will begin (in section 2) by defining intellectual virtues, borrowing largely from Jason Baehr’s account and argue that Christian beliefs are compatible with intellectual virtues understood as such. Then (in section 3) I will lay out some evidential support for Christianity using William Alston’s discussion of religious experience. Then I will move away from evidential considerations into more practical ones, shifting the discussion (in sections 4 and 5) to how practical considerations can justify Christian beliefs. I will argue that one should have intellectual loyalty, or epistemic bias towards her Christian beliefs, and that this bias towards her

¹ This is Miriam Schleifer McCormick’s view. See Chapter 3 of her *Believing Agency the Evidence: Agency and the Ethics of Belief*.

own belief will ultimately make her more open-minded towards other beliefs. Then I will argue that the hope Christianity provides adds to its justification. Finally, in Section 6, I will address a potential objection that maintaining Christian beliefs requires similar sorts of intellectual vices that we see in extreme conspiracy theorists.

II. Intellectual Virtues

In this section, I will define intellectual virtues, primarily using Jason Baehr's account in his book "The Inquiring Mind". Before I move to discussing intellectual virtues, it is necessary that I first make a few clarifying points. First, I do not intend to lay out all the different beliefs one must accept in any Christian tradition. My purpose is not to provide a theological defense of every detail of Christianity, but rather to argue that it is possible to hold Christian beliefs and also be an intellectually virtuous person. I also must point out that I am not trying to argue that being a Christian is sufficient for one to be intellectually virtuous. There are many Christians who are not interested in engaging with views other than their own, and merely believe what they do because it is what has always been taught to them. While I do not think this way of living is necessarily morally wrong, this type of blind acceptance certainly does not qualify as intellectual virtue. Now I will move on to defining intellectual virtues.

Gaining truth about the world is a difficult task, but there are still some things are obvious to us and are not exceedingly difficult to learn. If I am sitting in the kitchen and I hear a crash in the living room, I can walk over and find out with very little difficulty what happened. There is hardly any effort involved for me. Or to mention a more theoretical example, I do not know what $3486+23985$ equals, but it would be quite easy for me to find that out by just typing it into a calculator. Truths like these are easy to discover. It is also quite easy to have the appearance of learning without gaining true knowledge. I can watch hours of cable news and feel

like I have become a significantly more informed person, but it may be that I have just learned how to better repeat a cable network narrative. Discovering meaningful truths involves a lot of difficulty. For example, while I was easily able to figure out that the previously mentioned sum came out to 27471, the process for trying to discern and articulate some of the intellectual merits of religious beliefs in this paper has been a very strenuous process that has taken much hard work and thought.

While I have mentioned some more trivial examples of pursuing knowledge, Jason Baehr gives some more profound examples where intellectual virtues were demonstrated. He discusses Frederick Douglass, a former slave who escaped and became a leader in the abolition movement in the 1800's, who worked his hardest to train himself to read as a slave because he thirsted for the freedom of mind that he could only gain through education. In his autobiography, Douglass talks about trading his meals to children in his neighborhood in return for a little teaching on how to read. He says regarding this practice, "This bread I used to bestow on the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge" (Douglass 34). In Douglass we see a man who was so passionate for knowledge that he fought to learn and would trade his food to children while he was on errands so that he could gain just a little more of it. Gaining knowledge is not some mechanical process that one can just turn on, but it requires struggling past physical and intellectual hindrances. As Baehr says, referring to difficult cases of seeking knowledge, "As such [the acquisition of knowledge] makes demands on us as cognitive agents-- it requires that we think, reason, judge, evaluate, read, interpret, adjudicate, search, or reflect in various ways" (Baehr 2011, 18). While all these actions require natural ability and proper functioning of the mind, they also require a certain level of learned traits. For this reason, Baehr distinguishes between traits that come naturally to us and intellectual virtues.

Baehr describes many of these natural traits that might easily be confused with intellectual virtues and distinguishes them from each other, but I will just focus on what he calls faculties and skills. Under the category of cognitive faculties, Baehr lists our senses, memory, introspection and reason (Baehr 2011, 22). He goes on to describe three ways in which these faculties differ from our intellectual virtues. The first is that faculties “are part of our natural or native cognitive endowment” (Baehr 2011, 22). Intellectual virtues take work and conscious effort to develop. Although there may be ways to sharpen one’s memory, or become more proficient at introspection, these traits are much more clearly tied to one’s genetic makeup than intellectual virtues. Although we may have certain natural bents towards different intellectual virtues, being, for example, open-minded is a conscious choice I must make and I must nurture, whereas my memory is just a function of my brain. Another important difference that Baehr points out is that faculties are not personal in the same way that intellectual virtues are (Baehr 2011, 23). I will expand on this idea later in the paper, but Baehr argues that intellectual virtues speak to one’s character in a way that faculties cannot. He says, “To say of someone that she is inquisitive, attentive, fair-minded... that she prizes knowledge and understanding above reputation, wealth, or pleasure... is to say something about who she is as a person” (Baehr 2011, 23).

While we do, at times, criticize or praise people for their faculties, I contend that labeling someone virtuous or vicious on account of their innate abilities is not warranted. If I happened to be born with a photographic memory, this would not merit my being considered a good person. Furthermore, if I were to develop some form of dementia, it would, at best, be misinformed to say that I was a worse person on account of my illness. It is true that many times we will praise people for their natural abilities, but people who we praise with natural abilities usually hone

those abilities somehow, and this is a major part of what warrants our praise of them. In fact, we tend to look down on people with natural abilities who do not use them well. I have been a life-long Penn State football fan and I can vividly remember how frustrating it was to have Christian Hackenberg as our quarterback. It was uniquely frustrating because he was one of the most talented quarterbacks we had ever had at the position, and yet he seemed to give up half-way through his career. This was one of the most angering things I had experienced as a middle schooler because I could see the athlete was talented enough to bring value to our team and help us win, but he was squandering it². Faculties are part of our genetic makeup, and although how one uses her faculties very much involves intellectual virtues, they are two clearly different things.

Another trait that Baehr distinguishes from intellectual virtues is the category of skills. Baehr defines skills as “abilities to perform certain reasonably specific or technical intellectual tasks” (Baehr 2011, 29). Skills include categories like teaching, coding, and writing. They are the abilities that allow us to function in our occupations, but, just like faculties, they do not reflect on our character. Skills and virtues are closely related, though. As Baehr points out, both skills and intellectual virtues are cultivated, and developing skills usually requires a certain level of virtue, but the two are still quite distinct from one another. Baehr argues that skills are not personal in the same way that intellectual virtues are. Although skills are more closely related to intellectual virtues than faculties, they do not clearly contribute to personal worth (Baehr 2011, 30). I happen to be a very poor coder. I just barely scraped by in my introductory computer science class with a passing grade. But this does not poorly reflect on my character. If I were able to push past my

² To be completely fair to Hackenberg, he did not have a very competent offensive line protecting him, but the purpose of this paper is not football analysis, so I will not pursue this any further.

natural inability and become an above average coder, it would require intellectual virtue on my part, but my having or not having a skill does not say anything about my character.

The other difference that is closely related to the first is that “skills are fundamentally a kind of competence” (Baehr 2011, 30). What he means by this is that skills can be compared to a final product, while intellectual virtues are more comparable to a process. He gives the example of a scientist who engages in very diligent, careful research, but merely for the purpose of gaining money and professional status (Baehr 2011, 30). While we might have admiration for the scientist’s professional skill, most would agree that his character falls short of demonstrating intellectual virtue. Intellectual virtues involve pursuing knowledge for more than things like monetary gain. One does not need to be born with exceptional skills or faculties to be intellectually virtuous, but rather she must nurture the talents she has in pursuit of a higher goal.

I have spent time talking about what intellectual virtues are not, as well as behaviors that are intellectually virtuous, but before I go on to argue that Christian beliefs are consistent with intellectual virtues, I must give a more explicit explanation of what intellectual virtues actually are. The key to understanding intellectual virtue lies in Baehr’s discussion of personal worth. In simplified terms, Baehr’s concept of personal intellectual worth is how good or bad someone is in the intellectual realm. By this, I do not mean how intelligent or unintelligent someone is, but rather, how one pursues intellectual good or bad. As Baehr says, “Indeed, someone might possess perfect vision, a photographic memory, and an extraordinarily high IQ, while still being a deeply flawed or vicious person” (Baehr 2011, 93). Possessing advanced faculties and skills is not what makes one an intellectually good person. He lays out what specifically makes one intellectually virtuous with his formal definition of the *basis of personal intellectual worth* (BIW) which is as follows:

“A subject S is intellectually good or better qua person to the extent that S is positively oriented toward or “loves” what is intellectually good and is negatively oriented toward or “hates” what is intellectually bad” (Baehr 2011, 101).

What determines whether someone is an intellectually good person is whether someone embraces the practices and mindsets that are conducive to knowledge and spurns the things that would hinder knowledge. Returning to the example of Frederick Douglass, what made him such a profoundly intellectually good person is not his IQ or reasoning skills (although presumably he did excel in both these categories), but rather it was his undying love of knowledge, and his willingness to push through any hindrance to that knowledge.

Baehr finishes his account by tying together all the pieces he discussed in his definition of intellectual virtues. He says, “an intellectual virtue is a character trait that contributes to its possessor’s personal intellectual worth on account of its involving a positive psychological orientation towards epistemic goods” (Baehr 2011, 102). A person who is intellectually virtuous loves epistemic good, and an intellectual virtue is any characteristic in that person that orients them towards that epistemic good. Frederick Douglass loved knowledge, and he had a tenacity in pursuing it. These traits oriented him towards epistemic good, and therefore, they qualify as intellectual virtues.

Now that I have laid out a broad view of intellectual virtues, I will argue that Christian beliefs are compatible with intellectual virtues. Before I do this, I want to make a clarifying comment about my explication of Baehr. Baehr puts a lot of focus in his book on the role of epistemic virtue in epistemology and how it fits into an analysis of knowledge. This discussion is not particularly helpful for the purpose of paper, so I will not include it, but I wish to make a point about intellectual virtues. Whether or not intellectual virtues have any role in the formal

definition of knowledge, everyone can agree that they do play a role in gaining knowledge. It is possible that one could be the Forrest Gump of epistemology who always, by coincidence, ends up in the right place to gain knowledge. But this is an unlikely scenario and not one that is important to consider, so even if intellectual virtue has no place in a definition of knowledge, it is safe to say that it helps us gain knowledge, which is a very good thing. Now I will delve into some of the some of the evidential factors that contribute to the justification of Christian beliefs.

III. Religious Experience

There is a strong case to be made that one can be justified in her Christian beliefs as a result of evidential factors. When talking about the justification of Christian beliefs, people can be quick to jump to purely rational arguments for or against the existence of God, but for the purposes of this paper I want to focus on the place of experience in justifying Christian belief. Although, in philosophy, experience is not typically the first piece of evidence we turn to in order to prove something, it is a very valuable piece of evidence that informs many of our beliefs in everyday life. For example, we do not typically believe that an external world exists based on purely rational arguments, but rather because we experience it existing. Perhaps we can have our belief in the external world bolstered by rational argument, but that argument comes after we believe in the external world by experience. Experience is essential for understanding the world around us and should never be undervalued.

But how does all this relate to religious beliefs? I will begin by arguing that people can be justified in holding religious beliefs, in part, based on experience. Borrowing from William Alston, I will defend why religious experience should be considered strong evidence for religious beliefs. Even though many people may have different religious experiences, I believe that religious experience can form part of a rational basis for religious beliefs.

One major objection to Christian beliefs is that there is not enough evidence to believe in God. As W.K. Clifford put it, “To sum up: it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence” (Clifford 1879, 168). And since there is not enough evidence to establish a belief in God, say because of the problem of evil or other such evidence against Christian beliefs, it would be wrong for one to believe in God. In short, there is not enough evidence for God’s existence, so we should not believe it. There are two aspects in which this conclusion is incorrect. First, there are good evidential reasons to believe Christianity, and secondly, it makes the incorrect assumption that evidence is the only thing needed for epistemic justification.

Many deny that religious experience could be sufficient evidence to rationally accept a belief in God. They would argue that religious experience is completely subjective, and therefore unable to firmly establish any religious beliefs, but this is not a proper understanding of religious experience. Before I proceed to argue for the epistemic value of religious experience, I will first clarify what I mean by it. William Alston defines religious experience as manifestations of “God’s nature and activities... in our lives” (Alston 1983, 105). By this he does not mean visions of God or other “sensory hallucinations” but rather experiences like feeling God’s forgiveness and being freed from the weight of one’s sins or feeling God’s divine providence and care in one’s life (Alston 1983, 104-105). In short, religious experience is any sort of everyday experience that communicates to an individual, one or many attributes of God. These experiences tend to give us greater confidence or assurance that a personal God who is interested in our individual lives exists. But is it rational to use these experiences as evidence for the existence of God? Many people never experience any sort of divine presence in their lives. Others have had experiences that have caused them to believe firmly that God does not exist.

The first important point regarding this question is the importance of experience in our daily lives. If we think back to the question of whether or not the external world exists, we are justified in believing that the world exists without any purely rational arguments. Perhaps, like in Descartes' thought experiment, it would be a valuable exercise for us to doubt everything in order to find what the one thing we could not doubt is, but in a normal context, it is rational for us to trust our sense experience. And this trust needs no deep, rational justification. It would not be correct to say that only people who have thought deeply about the justification for following their senses are rational. Saying this would raise our standards for what we view as a justified belief to an unreasonable level. We do not need to be sure of something beyond the point of any doubt to be justified in believing it. Our senses, while they can be mistaken, are typically quite reliable, and are strong enough evidence to provide us with justification. They are central to who we are, and we are justified in trusting them.

But ultimately, most people do not doubt the value of our senses. The reason people tend to trust the physical experience of others over others' religious experience is that physical experience tends to be corroborated by everyone around us. Imagine Bob, a devoutly religious Christian, is crossing a busy street and forgets to check his left side before he walks out onto the street. Right as he takes his first step a car zooms right in front of him, where his next step would have been. Bob obviously witnesses the car zooming by, but he also experiences God's kind providence in sparing his life. The people in the street at the time who witness the event will all agree with Bob that he was almost hit by a car, but not all will agree that what they had just witnessed was divine providence. This is a simple example, but one that illustrates the point that sensory experience is corroborated in a way that religious experience is not. But does this discrepancy disqualify religious experience as evidence for our religious beliefs? I believe that it

does not. Our sense of the world around us is our main connection to reality, and therefore, it should take a lot of evidence for us to doubt our senses. This is not to say our senses cannot deceive us. Anything from a hallucination to a false sense of divine providence and intervention could cause one to be in error, but this does not mean that we should be skeptical of our senses unless whatever we experience is confirmed by others. Imagine if Adam were to just wake up on an uninhabited earth, fully conscious, but alone. He would undoubtedly believe the world he sensed around him was real, and since no one else exists in this scenario, there would be no way to decipher whether his sense of the physical world was a consensus building one.

We are rational to default to trusting our senses, but how should we respond when our experience is not confirmed? Let us return to the example of Adam to answer this question. Say a few more people have come into existence on the earth. One day Adam is observing a tree and makes a passing remark about it to one of his new friends. The friend, Eve, is confused, and says that she is positive she is looking at a rock. A few more friends come by and take Eve's side, all positive that they are looking at a rock³. Even in this case, Adam would still be justified in believing that he was observing a tree. The fact that the perceptions of others are not in line with his own is not good enough of a reason for him to abandon his belief that he is staring at a tree. He should most certainly be more skeptical of his own senses as a result of his disagreement, but his perception of a tree in front of him is still very good evidence that there is, in fact, a tree in front of him. And the same can be said of religious experience. The fact that many do not share one's experiences does not mean that those experiences are not compelling evidence for one's religious beliefs. As Alston puts it, "By virtue of having the experience the subject is in a position such that she will be adequately justified in the belief unless there are strong reasons to

³ For the sake of the example, let us imagine that this is not simply a language issue that is simply caused by Adam and Eve have different words to denote the same thing.

the contrary, unless there are defeaters of sufficient strength” (Alston 1983, 112). Religious experience is strong evidence for one’s religious beliefs, but it is insufficient for a robust justification of Christians belief. While I do believe there is other evidence for them, a full account of justifying Christian beliefs includes pragmatic factors. It is tempting, even for those who hold religious beliefs, to resort to a purely evidential view of justification. Before I go on to explain why I think this is incorrect, I will first explain the evidentialist thesis.

Evidentialism can be summarized by David Hume’s phrase, “A wise man proportions his beliefs to the evidence”. The idea conveyed by this quote is that beliefs are only as justified as they are supported by evidence. So if one has a large amount of evidence supporting a given proposition, he is justified in having a large amount of confidence in that proposition, but if one has a small amount of evidence for a given proposition, he is only justified in having a small amount of confidence in that proposition, perhaps not even enough for belief. There are different variations of this evidentialist thesis, but they all share the same basic idea that a belief is only fully justified based on evidence.

This evidentialist thesis seems quite intuitive, and there are many valuable lessons that we can gain from it. For example, it is important to always keep in mind that evidence is a key factor in establishing any belief. We live at a time where “alternative facts” and “fake news” are readily available to us through social media, and so now more than ever we should emphasize the importance of real evidence and not having baseless, potentially harmful beliefs. But this does not mean that evidence is the only factor involved in justifying beliefs. In fact, the evidentialist thesis requires that we build our beliefs on more than evidence. Evidentialism states that all our beliefs should be based on evidence, but why should we accept evidentialism? What is the evidence for that proposition? There must be some non-evidential reason why we would

accept evidentialism in the first place, which would be fine, if it were not for the claims of evidentialism. We need factors beyond evidence to justify our beliefs, the question is, “What should these other factors be?”. Throughout the rest of this paper, I will bring up some of these factors, and show how they contribute to justifying Christian belief.

IV. Intellectual Loyalty

The idea of intellectual loyalty⁴ is introduced in Sarah Stroud’s paper “Epistemic Partiality in Friendship”. The primary example that she uses to illustrate this point has to do with a third party making an accusation against one’s friend. Stroud imagines an example where someone accuses your friend Sam of sleeping with someone and then never returning her calls. In the example, this is totally new information to you and you do not actually know whether it is true (Stroud 2006, 504). So, what should a good friend do in this situation? Stroud says that a good friend would believe the best of Sam, but not because of evidential factors. Rather, she says that we should believe the best of our friends because esteem and commitment are integral to friendship. She says, “...friendship is in some important sense based on your friend’s character and on esteem for his merits” (Stroud 2006, 511). Since this is the case, we can safely say that esteeming your friend’s character is an important element of friendship. Stroud is saying that there are reasons for belief that are not epistemic, but rather are based on our interpersonal connections and commitments. Stroud brings up the idea that there are non-epistemic reasons for beliefs, but Allan Hazlett expands on it.

He says in his paper, “I shall understand intellectual loyalty as loyalty in the intellectual domain, where this comprises the (individual or collective) generation and sharing of information, and the practices and institutions that sustain and regulate these in a society”

⁴ Stroud does not use this exact term but the concept she talks about is the same

(Hazlett 2016, 328). Intellectual loyalty is the loyalty that we have to certain people or institutions that shapes the way we gather and process information. So, if we have some sort of intellectual loyalty to our family or friends, the beliefs that we form about them will be heavily influenced by the loyalty that we feel towards them. The example that Hazlett uses to illustrate this idea of intellectual loyalty has to do with loyalty to a community. He uses the example of the murder of Ruben Salazar during riots in East Los Angeles in 1970. He discusses the differing views of Oscar Acosta and Hunter Thompson based on the evidence of the case. Both of the men thought it was a murder that the L.A. Police department was responsible for, but they had differing views on the motivation of the killing. Acosta, who was a Chicago lawyer, believed that it was a conspiracy in the L.A. Police Department to kill off Salazar because of the criticism he had leveled towards the department. He was sure that it was a conspiracy in order to silence a voice that had spoken out against corruption. On the other hand, Thompson thought that the murder was just the result of the “half-mad stupidity and dangerous incompetence on every level of the law enforcement establishment” (Hazlett 2016, 329). Hazlett argues that the reason for Acosta’s insistence that the murder was part of a conspiracy was guided by his intellectual loyalty to the Chicano community.

This example is very helpful in illustrating what is meant by intellectual loyalty because it is not that one just blindly follows the community they are intellectually loyal to. Rather, when one reasons and processes the facts in a given circumstance, that process is affected by one’s loyalties. Thompson and Acosta both viewed the same evidence in this case and both ended up with reasonable conclusions based on that evidence, but Acosta’s conclusions were shaped by his intellectual loyalty to the Chicano community. Hazlett says, “I don’t mean to suggest that, in such cases, you take yourself to believe on the basis of emotional considerations—these would

be the ‘wrong kind of reasons’ for belief” (Hazlett 2016, 334). Intellectual loyalties do not just generate certain beliefs in us. Rather, they direct our process of belief forming.

Hazlett builds on the concept of intellectual loyalty by discussing three different ideas that are essential to it. The first idea is that “just as loyalty can make certain courses of action unthinkable for a person, loyalty can make certain doxastic attitudes unthinkable for a person” (Hazlett 2016, 331). What this means is that when we are loyal to someone or something, there are some attitudes towards them that we could not take. Hazlett goes on to say that it is a necessity that we have certain attitudes based on our relational attachments. He says, “The necessity is not logical or metaphysical; it is akin to the necessity of moral obligation” (Hazlett 2016, 331). One clear example of this idea is found in Kanye West’s song Family Business. In the song Kanye says, addressing a relative, “Who knew I’d have to look at you through a glass? And look, you tell me you ain’t did it then you ain’t did it...”. Kanye is telling his imprisoned relative that in spite of the evidence of the relative having committed a crime (e.g. his arrest and conviction of a crime), he will choose to believe what the relative says because of the family bond that the two share. Perhaps as in this case, it is unthinkable that I would believe that someone in my family would commit a felony and then lie to me about it. This analogy works quite well because it is commonly accepted that there are behaviors that one would avoid because of loyalties to a certain community, so it makes sense that there are certain doxastic attitudes that one avoid because of intellectual loyalties. The second idea that Hazlett brings up is “loyalty can lead you to refuse to believe something” (Hazlett 2016, 332). There can be things that would be so damaging for us to believe as people with intellectual loyalties that we can refuse to believe it. Again, this does not mean that we believe something because we want it to be true. I cannot just think to myself, “I want it to be the case that my parents would never lie to

me” and believe that to be true on the basis of that evidence. Rather, I will not think it true that my parents have lied to me because that would be so damaging. Of course, in the face of overwhelming evidence I would be forced to believe something I had previously refused to believe, but in the absence of evidence, my refusal will stand. The final idea that Hazlett presents is that “there are hinges of loyalty” (Hazlett 2016, 334). What Hazlett means by a hinge is that there are things that we are forced to believe as a result of being loyal to a certain group. He says that when all other “doxastic alternatives” are unthinkable to one, there is something that we are forced to believe. He continues, “When such necessities manifest loyalty, we can speak of hinges of loyalty, i.e., cases in which you are required to believe that p in virtue of your loyalty to someone or something” (Hazlett 2016, 335). There are times when because of loyalties we are forced to accept a proposition that would not be apparent to one without those loyalties but are acceptable for one with them.

To illustrate these three ideas, Hazlett applies them to the example he uses in the beginning of the paper. He says,

We can easily imagine that it is unthinkable for Acosta to believe that Salazar was not assassinated—so believing would amount to a betrayal of the community for whom Salazar is a martyr. And we can easily imagine that he refuses to believe the establishment line—that Salazar’s death was an accident. Finally, we can see how Acosta is required to believe that Salazar was assassinated, in virtue of his loyalty to the Chicano community (Hazlett 2016, 336).

An important point to note in Both Hazlett’s and Stroud’s writing is that neither of them condone completely cutting oneself off from negative information regarding one we feel intellectual

loyalty towards. Rather, we have a bias towards those people that affects how we process new information about them, but we must always pursue the truth about the people we are loyal to.

To return to Stroud's example of beliefs about your friend, she also points out that, regarding friendship, "Your friend need not prove each day, from scratch, that he is a good person" (Stroud 2006, 512). In other words, your friend should be innocent until proven guilty in your eyes if his character is attacked. Cases involving friendship are fundamentally different from other cases in our day to day lives of belief forming. Say for example, a stranger tells you in casual conversation that the New England Patriots lost to the Baltimore Ravens on Sunday night. You know that there exists a National Football League and that the Patriots and the Ravens are both teams in that league, but that is the extent of your football knowledge. In this case, it would make no sense for you to doubt what the stranger had said. But if the stranger said that your friend had done something morally wrong, you would be right to doubt him because you have a relationship to your friend while you are totally disconnected from the NFL (and even if you were, say, a Patriots fan, it would be difficult to argue there are any morally binding duties that one has to the sports team he roots for). According to Stroud, friendship entails epistemic demands that seemingly contradict the demands of most orthodox theories of epistemic rationality.

But many philosophers dispute that this seeming tension exists. One objection that Stroud brings up is that "One could argue that the good friend is merely applying general, impartial epistemological principles to the processing of new information about her friends, and that the conclusions she draws are in fact fully justified" (Stroud 2006, 515). Someone who makes this objection argues that when one has a friend, she will have a lot of information about this friend. She will have presumably spent a lot of time with her friend and has gotten to know the

friend on a deep level, so she has a lot of evidence which allows her to stand up for her friend's character when it is attacked. There can also be cases of differential information. Perhaps in the example with Sam being accused of sleeping with someone and never answering her calls, you happen to know that Sam lost his phone in an Uber that night and was not intentionally being hurtful. This idea that one might be epistemically justified in believing the best of her friends because of the large amount of evidence she has certainly works in some situations, but it does not disprove the point that Stroud makes. Imagine the example with Sam where you have no differential information. If your coworker accuses Sam of sleeping with a girl and then cutting off all communication, you might say that you know Sam well enough to know that he would not do that, but this is not in accordance with evidentialist principles. How could you know that Sam wouldn't do something like that? Perhaps he decided he had been strait-laced for long enough and he wanted to cut loose, or that, unbeknownst to you, some tragedy had happened in his life and his way of coping was living without restraint. Even though we might have a lot of evidence regarding our friends' characters, this does not mean that we can know what they would do at any given moment, and so from a purely evidentialist standpoint, one would not be able to believe the best of her friend in a scenario like that involving Sam. In fact, from an evidentialist standpoint in the absence of differential evidence, the best we can hope to do is suspend belief regarding our friend's actions until we get more evidence. But as I have already discussed, being a good friend involves sticking up for one's friends and believing the best of them at times when their character is attacked.

Before I go on to connect this discussion to religious beliefs, I want to reiterate a caveat that Stroud brings up in her paper that I mentioned earlier. She says that the epistemic bias that we have towards our friends is not an absolute refusal to believe any wrong about them (Stroud

2006, 513). It is not that we refuse to believe anything negative about our friends' characters, but it should take more evidence to make us think ill of our friends. While the norms of friendship may sometimes clash with the norms of evidentialism, we need not fear we must be bad believers in order to be good friends. Although we should be more reluctant to form negative beliefs about our friends, we must never shut ourselves off from the truth about them. What cases like these ones show is that evidentialism is an insufficient epistemic theory. It is not as though we have two options which are evidentialism or believing whatever we want regardless of the evidence. The majority of the cases in our everyday lives we should apply evidentialist principles, but as we see in the case of friendship, they are not sufficient for every circumstance. Believing despite evidentialist principles can at times help us to be better friends and, I will argue, better believers.

I have argued up to this point that friendship involves certain epistemic practices that are not in accordance with evidentialism, I will now argue that Christianity involves similar obligations. While it may seem like religious beliefs just involve affirming a given hypothesis like "God exists", in many cases, there is much more involved than merely affirming a proposition. For many people it involves being an active member of a faith community, which can entail hours of community involvement and service each week. Relationships, career choices, and lifestyle choices can all change radically when one ascribes to a religion. My personal belief is that one who follows the teachings of Jesus has a personal relationship with God, but one does not need to accept this to see that, say, being a Christian is in some ways analogous to being in a friendship, as far as the commitment.

Alvin Plantinga makes a point very similar to this one in one of his arguments against evidentialism. He says,

“If my belief in God is based on argument, then if I am to be properly rational, epistemically responsible, I shall have to keep checking the philosophical journals to see whether, say, Anthony Flew has finally come up with an objection to my favorite argument. This could be bothersome and time-consuming; and what do I do if someone finds a flaw in my argument? Stop going to church? ... [this] is like believing in the existence of your spouse on the basis of the analogical argument for other minds” (Plantinga 1983, 67).

Plantinga’s point is that there is so much that is entailed in a religious life that it would be absurd for one’s religious beliefs to require constant reaffirmation through argument. At some point we must commit to our religious beliefs and they must be the starting point for us when we look at given pieces of evidence. Now this does not mean that we should blindly commit to our religious beliefs. Just like in the case of friendship, one does not blindly think the best of her friend, but rather, she gives her friend a privileged status. If someone accuses her friend of lacking character, she will do all she can to defend her friend’s character in the moment, but this is not where her research will end. She must figure out whether the report about her friend was true, and if it was what the explanation was. In the same way, if someone who is a Christian learns about some argument for atheism that he cannot disprove, it would be rational for him to not drop his beliefs on the spot. He would be justified in holding his beliefs despite the evidence because of the relational nature of religious beliefs. While I do not believe someone in this position would be forced to suspend or change his beliefs, he would be bound to pursue this evidence with an open mind to see where the evidence led him. We should be open to new evidence and to following it to where it leads, but to effectively do this, we must have some sort of stable, foundational beliefs that we can rest on.

While I am arguing here that in some situations we can be justified in our religious beliefs despite evidence against them, I will contend that this will ultimately help us form better beliefs. Imagine someone whose entire life revolves around his faith. This entails hours spent at his church, whether it be at Bible studies or different charitable endeavors, as well as his personal spiritual rhythms, say, reading the Bible and praying before he wakes up and goes to sleep. If he was duty bound to drop all his beliefs every time he saw a new argument against his religion, he would be too scared to ever look into any challenges of his beliefs because it would completely disrupt his life. While it could be argued that this would be unhealthy psychologically, it is also easy to see how this would harm one's epistemic pursuits. As someone who was raised in the church, I have been asked many times if I think it is unwise to study philosophy. The idea is that I should fear studying philosophy because as I see arguments against what I believe, this will inevitably weaken my faith. Now this is an extreme example, but I think it is helpful in illustrating the point that having a doxastic slant towards our religious beliefs can provide a safety net that may make us more inclined to explore new ideas, and eventually come to more informed opinions. So, while I am arguing that we should hold to our religious beliefs at some times for non-evidential reasons, I think this system can ultimately lead us to a superior epistemic status.

It is important to note that in this section I am not addressing how we decide what religious beliefs to accept initially. Rather, I have been describing how we should process new evidence once we have already established our beliefs. Having this commitment to our already established beliefs in the realm of religion may seem intellectually dishonest and uncondusive to new beliefs, but the case is quite the opposite. It allows for a healthy platform from which to

challenge one's own beliefs and ultimately have a more rigorous process by which to form beliefs.

The claim that a belief in God that is held with epistemic bias can make us more open-minded people who engage with many different views may seem absurd on the surface. How could cutting oneself off from considering evidence that undermines one's own belief possibly make you more open-minded? I want to begin by defining what it means to be open-minded. Baehr defines the open-minded person as such: "An open-minded person is characteristically (a) willing and (within limits) able (b) to transcend a default cognitive standpoint (c) in order to take up or take seriously the merits of (d) a distinct cognitive standpoint" (Baehr 2011, 152). Baehr is saying that an open-minded person will take views other than her own seriously; she will seriously engage with other views because she has a strong desire to know the truth. One who is open-minded does not merely examine views that she disagrees with in order "to know what the other side believes", but she does it in a genuine pursuit of the truth. But if this is what it is to be open-minded, how can one be open-minded if she has an epistemic bias towards her own beliefs? I believe that this can happen because it is possible to seriously consider other beliefs while having a strong epistemic bias towards one's own beliefs.

The first thing we must remember when considering open-mindedness, is the importance of our beliefs. Some beliefs that we have are not at all essential to our identity. I believe that Des Moines is the capital of Iowa, but this belief does not in any way contribute to my identity. It is a fact that I accept, but my holding this belief does not have any meaningful role in my identity. But there are other beliefs that are critical to one's identity and give meaning to one's life. The example I am focusing on in this paper is a belief in God. One example of this meaning making belief is the faith seen in the British philosopher C.S. Lewis. Lewis famously said, "I believe in

Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else”. For Lewis, Christianity was not merely some proposition that he held from an intellectual standpoint, but it was a belief that was central to his identity. Beliefs like this are very important in providing us with meaning in life, as well as stability. And these beliefs are not necessarily religious in nature. For some it might be the belief that one’s spouse is his soulmate, or perhaps it is the belief in a political ideology, or something of that sort. While we should be open to new evidence and believing what is true rather than what we merely want to believe, these central beliefs should be held with a certain tenacity that other beliefs are not. These beliefs are so central to our identity and stability that it should take more evidence for me to reject them than it should for me to change my belief on the capital city of a state.

We have established that it is both important to have a strong grasp on our identity defining beliefs, but also that it is important to cultivate the intellectual virtue of open-mindedness. I believe that although epistemic bias (specifically towards Christianity) may seem to be opposed to open-mindedness on the surface, in reality, the two can go very much hand-in-hand. The reason for this is the stability that epistemic bias provides. If my Christian faith is at the core of my very being, rejecting that faith will be something that terrifies me. Perhaps I can say with the Apostle Peter as he addresses Jesus, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of life...” (John 6:68, ESV). If I am afraid that every bit of contrary evidence, I see will shatter my faith, or force me to stop believing in Christianity, I will be afraid to seek out ideas that differ from my own. And we cannot just condemn this as vicious behavior. If my beliefs are central to my identity, I am looking out for my own good when I try to avoid having them done away with. Perhaps this would not be the most intellectually virtuous move on my part, but I would take psychological stability over being deemed intellectually virtuous any day.

But we need not choose between personal stability and open-mindedness. As I said in the last section, even the beliefs that we hold with bias must be subject to scrutiny. While I can be epistemically partial towards my Christian beliefs, this does not mean that they are immune from evidential inquiry. It is wrong to stubbornly hold on to a belief after it has been shown to be false. If you eventually find that your views are misinformed, you should give those misinformed views up. Epistemic partiality is not synonymous with irrationality, but rather, it provides a safe foundation from which one can explore other ideas. I have the freedom to truly engage with, for example, atheist arguments against Christianity because I do not have to fear my identity crumbling at the first piece of evidence I see. Approaching evidence this way is intellectually virtuous, but also more psychologically healthy. I have met people who live very bitter lives because their faith was “stolen” from them. What usually has happened in cases like these is that the person had very strong views that they protected from any sort of challenges. One might think that his faith (along with every specific view he has under the umbrella of faith) is perfectly accounted for by the evidence, while simultaneously avoiding the views of people he disagrees with because they will only “lead him astray”. Some people can go their whole lives like this, but others inevitably experience arguments from the other side, and feel as though they can no longer believe Christianity once they are exposed to those arguments. This is not an easy process to undergo, and many people feel betrayed as a result.

But, if I can explore other ideas without the fear of my faith being completely undermined the first time I see evidence against my beliefs, I can study with an open mind and truly engage with those arguments. And if over time my faith is undermined, because perhaps in truly engaging with the other side I find my currently held beliefs to be false, then I have been broken into my new beliefs, in a manner of speaking. The rug was not ripped out from under my

feet, but rather, I gradually stepped off it. A Christian can be open-minded and explore the views of others because she does not have to fear the beliefs that define her being taken away all at once. Perhaps if, later on in life, she finds that her views were false, she can say that she no longer agrees with Peter and that there are no other places for her to go outside of Christianity. And Christian doctrine is clear that we should find something else to believe if Christianity is false. In his letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul says that if Jesus did not actually resurrect and the things he said about himself were false, “we [Christians] are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:19 ESV). Christians are told in the Bible to abandon their beliefs if they are not true.

Now there is obvious tension here. As a Christian I can be open-minded, but I should also show epistemic partiality towards my belief in God. In practice, this is not an easy thing to do. We can vacillate between closing our minds off to the people we disagree with and giving too much weight to insignificant evidence against our beliefs without spending the time to truly process that evidence. But this is a healthy tension that we should live in. There should be nuance to our doxastic practices and the beliefs that are integral to our identity. And because of this tension, one can strongly hold to Christian beliefs while also cultivating the intellectual virtue of open-mindedness.

V. Hope

As I have established earlier in this paper, there are reasons to believe beyond just evidential ones. In this section of my paper I will argue that the hope that Christian beliefs provide contribute to their justification. I will begin by explaining the nature of Christian Hope, largely borrowing from Anne Jeffrey’s work on the subject. After I have explained what constitutes Christian Hope, I will compare the Christian account of hope to other accounts,

particularly those of Sharon Ryan and Miriam McCormick. Finally, I will expand on some examples of Christian Hope from both scriptures and more modern examples and argue that they are consistent with modern accounts of justified hope.

In her paper “Hope in Christianity”, Anne Jeffrey lays out an interpretation of the idea of hope as is presented in Christian Doctrine. The term “hope” is commonly used in casual conversation as something synonymous to simply wishing, but the term is much more full of meaning in Christian doctrine. Christian hope is multifaceted, including hope for certain positive outcomes in the future, as well as hope in the personal God who is at the center of the whole belief system. To explain the Christian view of hope, Jeffrey begins by discussing the objects of Christian hope. She divides the object of hope into two main categories: objectual and interpersonal. Interpersonal is hope in another person, rather than a specific outcome. The main object of this interpersonal hope is God, who is the center of all Christian belief. When Jeffrey discusses this idea she says, “We see this most pronounced where theologians discuss the norms of hope... For they argue that hope in Christ or in God must be primary and prior to hope for the various goods God might offer. Love of God and faith or trust in God should issue in hope in God” (Jeffrey 2019, 38-39). A Christian is not supposed to merely hope for a specific outcome in his life, but he is supposed to put his hope in God. While it is legitimate to hope for a certain outcome, that is not the center of Christian belief. For example, I can hope that Christianity will offer me structure, community and meaning in my life that I greatly desire, but the point of Christianity is not merely those ends. Christianity tells us to have faith and hope in the person of God. We must hope in God rather than using him as a means to the ends we desire. He must be the primary object of our hope, from one’s hope in him springs the other hopes we have.

Adrienne Martin discusses the idea of “hoping in” another in her book “How We Hope” and she calls this a kind of hope “normative hope”. This is when we engage with a person as someone with reasoning abilities. Martin says, “When we relate to someone interpersonally, we treat her as a reasoner”. Martin then goes on to expand on what this means when she says, “To relate to someone as a reasoner is not just to treat her in a way that relies on her capacity to reason, but also to stand ready to exchange reasons with her...” (Martin 2014, 122). When we have normative hope, we do not merely hope for some outcome, but we place our hope in a person, a rational agent, who we engage with and have expectations of. Of course, when talking about God, the situation does not exactly match talking about interacting with another person. For one thing, even if one believes that God is active and listening to our prayers, the way we interact with God is quite different from the way we interact with other people. For one thing, we cannot casually have a two-way conversation with God where we understand exactly what he is trying to say. But there are also ways in which our relationship to God is analogous to another person. For a Christian, God is not just a genie who is there to fulfil our wishes. He is not just some potential for us to have a better outcome. He is meant to be someone that we love and follow. He is meant to be engaged with. This is why our hope in him is interpersonal hope. Martin says, “Normative hope involves a stance taken towards the capacities and/or situation of the agent about whom one hopes” (Martin 2014, 130). Our hope as Christians is not merely a hope in an outcome. It is a hope in the God who we also trust will bring about those outcomes. We primarily hope in him because of who he is. But the other facet of hope is the hope in the outcomes we believe that God will bring about.

This kind of hope we see in Christianity is characterized by Jeffrey as objectual hope. This is hope that is considered secondary to the interpersonal hope in God. This includes things

like hope for salvation and the second coming of Jesus where he will restore God's kingdom on this earth, but also more mundane things like personal connections based on a shared love of God (Jeffrey 2019, 39). One verse in the New Testament that encapsulates both the extraordinary and mundane objects of hope is found in the Gospel of Mark. This quote of Jesus comes after much heavy teaching on the cost of discipleship in an attempt to show the apostles that although there will be costs to following him, it will be worth it. The passage goes as follows: "Jesus said, 'Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life'" (Mark 10:29-30, ESV). In this passage Jesus is telling his disciples that although they might lose friends and family over their commitment to him, they will not only receive eternal life (the extraordinary promise), but they will also receive "houses and brothers and sisters and mothers..." which is commonly understood as being a promise of Christian community.

So far we have seen that Christian Hope includes both interpersonal hope in the personal God of the Bible, as well as objectual hope of God bringing about certain desirable outcomes, but there are still some more nuances to capture before I move on. The first unique aspect of Christian hope that I will highlight is its connection to faith. According to Christian belief, hope requires some level of confidence. Hope is not a disposition that one can develop without any belief that what is hoped for will actually come about. For this reason, Jeffrey claims that Christian hope must be preceded by faith (Jeffrey 2019, 44). One must have faith in God that he is real, caring, loving, and that he has a plan for one's life, even when one cannot see that plan.

Jeffrey adds an extended quote from the theologian Jurgen Moltmann that discusses the relationship between hope and faith. Moltmann says,

“Faith is the foundation upon which hope rests, hope nourishes and sustains faith. For as no one except him who already believes His promises can look for anything from God, so again the weakness of our faith must be sustained and nourished by patient hope and expectation, let it fail and grow faint. . . Faith in Christ gives hope its assurance”

(Moltmann 1993, 22).

Christian hope requires one to believe that an outcome that cannot be seen will truly be brought about, and since we cannot see that outcome in the present, it requires faith in God. There would be no basis for hope if we did not have faith. This is the reason why Jeffrey can say, “The Christian view claims that hope excludes knowledge and that hope involves certainty, simultaneously” (Jeffrey 2019, 44). I believe that Jeffrey overstates the Christian hope when she says it involves certainty. This would put an unrealistic expectation on all those who hope. Even if one has unmistakably experienced God in his life, there will be many times when it seems that there are many reasons to doubt that God will really help him or will follow out on his promises. The Psalms are full of instances of the psalm writer expressing doubts in God and the promises of God. But there is also a balance. Hope is not merely a disposition that requires no belief whatsoever. There still must be a certain level of faith in God for one to truly have hope in a Christian framework.

Before I continue in my discussion of hope I must first draw a distinction between hope, faith, and belief. Sometimes these terms are treated as interchangeable because of their similar definitions, but the terms all have important distinctions. Belief very generally involves mentally affirming a proposition, but there are many things that I believe that I do not have any hope or

faith in. I believe that there are fifty states in the U.S., but that is just a fact that I affirm. I have no special relationship to this belief. It is something I affirm, but there are no special obligations entailed by this belief. This is one of the main distinctions between faith and belief. Faith is not the mere affirmation of a proposition. Faith is rooted in belief, but it entails obligation and action. In James' epistle, the author clearly makes this point in talking to his audience when he says, "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!" (James 2:19, ESV). What James is saying in the context of the letter is that merely affirming propositions regarding God is not enough. One must not just believe that God is good, but he must trust God and he must love God. So, while we can say that faith is based on the affirmation of certain propositions, that is only a part of it. There are also actions like love and trust that must accompany the affirmation for something to be faith. But what is it that separates Christian hope from faith? Hope and faith are very similar to each other. Both are based on an affirmation of some proposition, but there is something more foundational about faith. Faith is primarily focused on the object of that faith whereas hope's focus is on that object's relationship to ourselves. We can have faith that God is good, but when we hope in God's goodness we hope that he will extend that goodness to us and those around us. We do not merely believe things about God or about the people around us, but we believe that the things we have faith in will also bring about our best good. This is not to say that hope is completely self-centered, but it does include the recognition that the faith one has will lead to her good. It is the difference between just believing that God is good and believing that that goodness is good news for you.

I have talked a lot about the importance of faith to hope, but what is the basis for this faith that leads us to hope? One might think that if Christian hope involves belief without certainty, it requires tricking yourself into believing something that you have no reason to believe. But this is

not how Christian hope works. Rather, this hope is partially validated by experiences of the past, as I mentioned earlier in my paper.

“Beyond bodily resurrection, there are many Christian objectual hopes that have an event or promise of God as their objective rational ground, on the Christian account. Hope for deliverance from enemies rests on the actual event of God rescuing Israel from enemies in the past and God’s faithful character, which invites trust for future deliverance. We can rationally hope for God’s kingdom to come, and the new heavens and the new earth, both because Christ promises to come again and bring with him the kingdom of God, and because God has already accomplished the condition for this occurring by defeating death” (Jeffrey 2019, 51).

Christians have faith and hope in God because of what he has done for them in the past. There is a recurring theme in the Old Testament of telling the younger generations about the great things God had done for his people in the past. The idea was that it was important to constantly be reminded of the past works of God as a basis for present hope in him. The events that we look back to have changed over time. In Ancient Israel the basis for the hope in God was his deliverance of the Jewish people from Israel, whereas modern Christians would look back to the resurrection of Jesus as the grounding belief for our faith, as well as other things. Perhaps a Christian can look back to a certain encounter he had with God as an event that grounds his hope. Whatever the specific event(s), the fact remains that the Christian’s hope and faith are grounded in the past, which allows for justification in believing that a future event will come to pass. But there are other considerations that justify hope, one being the action it enables in the future. When someone has hope, it enables them to carry on despite hard circumstances. If one thinks there is no hope for the future, she will not feel motivated to act in the moment. Both

evidential and practical reasons justify hopes. Now that I have discussed the ancient Christian view of hope, I will lay out two contemporary accounts and discuss whether Christian hope can be reconciled with either of them.

The first account I want to lay out is that of Sharon Ryan. In her paper, “Evidentialism, Hope, and Wisdom” she argues that while it is important to have hope, it simultaneously appears to be irrational. She argues that wise people tend to have hope for the future, but hope for the future “requires one to make emotional and intellectual leaps beyond, or despite one’s evidence” (Ryan 2018, 281). But she previously asserted that “If S is wise, then the vast majority of S’s doxastic attitudes fit her evidence” (Ryan 2018, 280). So how can these two conflicting claims be reconciled? Ryan’s solution is to treat hope as a disposition rather than as a doxastic state. She uses the term (FIT) to describe scenarios where the evidence does not necessarily imply one conclusion. She defines FIT as when “S’s evidence fits a rationally evaluable non-doxastic cognitive attitude A iff either (i) S’s total evidence supports A or (ii) S’s total evidence supports neither A nor \sim A” (Ryan 2018, 287). What Ryan means by this is that if one’s evidence leans towards the possibility of a proposition being true but is indecisive, or if it is neutral regarding the truth of a proposition, it is acceptable for one to have an attitude of hope towards that proposition, assuming it does not involve actually believing that the proposition is true.

She explains this using the example of Regina, a woman who is getting married in two years. Her hope is that she will be able to dance with her 87-year-old grandfather at her wedding, but due to his poor health, there is no real way of knowing whether or not this will happen. Ryan argues that she can have a disposition of hope without really believing that her grandfather will be able to dance with her at her wedding. Ryan’s concern is that if we throw aside evidential

standards for belief that could cause us to have unwarranted hope, it could lead us to acting foolishly. While this is a legitimate concern, I believe that it is a flawed response to the problem.

Now there is a somewhat trivial way in which this account of hope is reconcilable with the Christian account of hope. Because Christian hope is said to be grounded in the evidence of what God has done in the past, one could reconcile Ryan's account of hope with the Christian account, but I think there is a much more fundamental way in which these accounts cannot be reconciled. The major difference between these two accounts is the view of what hope actually is. For Christians, an essential aspect of hope is that fact that it is something in which we have some level of belief that it is true, small or great. Hope is not just a non-doxastic attitude that one takes towards a proposition, but it is something that we genuinely believe is likely to be true. And I believe this is the only way to have genuine hope. This is not to say that it is impossible to have doubt and simultaneously hope, or that hope cannot carry someone along when belief is fading, but hope is of no value if it is not grounded in belief. Bryan Stevenson, whose example I expand on below, says at one point in his book, *Just Mercy*, "Still, I forced myself to be hopeful" (Stevenson 128). While this may not seem like genuine belief, what Stevenson is saying is that he forced himself to believe that despite the odds, his efforts would not be in vain. It was not a disposition of hope, but a belief against the evidence that he would succeed. It is easy enough to say that one can have a disposition of hope without actually believing a proposition, but I do not see how it is possible to do so. I cannot hope for God to bring about justice in the world if I do not believe that he will do so. Again, one does not need to be 100% certain of the thing she hopes for, but if she does not have a belief that the object of her hope will come to pass, at most, what she has is an optimistic disposition, but it does not qualify as hope. The Christian concept of

hope is not reconcilable with Ryan's, and I believe beyond that, there is good reason to reject her account.

A different account of hope that I believe can be reconciled with Christian account is Miriam Schleifer McCormick's that is found in her paper "Rational Hope". McCormick sets up a holistic framework for evaluating the rationality of hope. She sets up four criteria for evaluating that are as follows: "(i) The likelihood of the hoped-for outcome obtaining, (ii) The goodness or significance of the hoped-for outcome, (iii) The significance and the benefits to the agent of having the attitude, (iv) The likelihood of hope having an effect on the outcome" (McCormick 2017, 132). One major issue with purely evidentialist accounts of hope is that they only focus on the evidential aspect, but there is more that goes into justifying belief and hope than just the evidential aspects. But within McCormick's framework hope is evaluated from multiple different angles, making it a more complete account of hope. There are certainly differences between this account of hope and the Christian account, but I believe that when Christian hope is analyzed through the lens of McCormick's account, we will see that the Christian concept of hope is rational. I will now attempt to show that the hope essential to Christian beliefs can be reconciled with McCormick's account of rational hope by using a few ancient and modern examples.

The first example I want to use is a passage in the Bible that follows as such:

"Remember my affliction and my wanderings,

the wormwood and the gall!

My soul continually remembers it

and is bowed down within me.

But this I call to mind,

and therefore I have hope:

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

“The LORD is my portion,” says my soul,
“therefore I will hope in him.” (Lamentations 3: 19-24).

In this passage, the author is beginning to despair about life because of the hardships he is going through. This is a somewhat common theme throughout scripture, particularly in the more poetic books like the Psalms. In this passage the author is afflicted with unspecified hardships, but in the midst of these afflictions he calls to mind God’s faithfulness to him throughout his life and this gives him hope for the future. So, to begin, I think we can safely say that there is a good chance of this outcome obtaining. The author roots his hope for the future in what God has done for him in the past and what he perceived God doing in his day to day life. It is God’s mercies that are “new every morning” that give him hope that God will have mercy on him in the future, and for this reason I believe we can say that the hoped for outcome is likely to obtain. The next criteria is the goodness of the hoped for outcome. While it is not specifically laid out in this passage what that outcome is, it is clear that the desired outcome involves the author’s psychological and physical circumstances improving. The author is desiring nothing wrong, but rather is asking that God would save him from the hardships he is undergoing. I also think there is a clear benefit to this attitude of hope. Many times in the Christian experience, the reason one doubts God and loses hope is not based on a careful evaluation of the evidence, but rather because one loses sight of the bigger picture in the face of hardship. For example, one might understand that suffering in one’s own life is not a sign that God has abandoned him, but in the moment all he can think about is the

suffering, and so loses sight of what he knows to be true. This attitude of hope can be profoundly beneficial, as we even see it was for the author, because it can cause us to look past our current situation and put into perspective how our current situation fits into the bigger picture of life. Finally, I think this hope that the author has will help bring about the desired outcome. Ultimately the author says that his hope is in God, but the author, I believe, would also say that he must be actively looking out for what God is doing. If the author were to get lost in despair, he could end up missing what God was trying to tell him, and even miss the mercies that God was showing to him. On the whole, I believe that the hope described by this passage counts as rational according to McCormick's criteria.

The other example that I want to analyze is that of Bryan Stevenson. Stevenson is a lawyer who has spent his career fighting for justice for people who have been wrongly put on death row. His book, *Just Mercy*, follows his legal battle to reverse Walter MacMillian's death sentence. Walter had been wrongly accused of murder in rural Alabama, even though the evidence clearly pointed to his innocence. The book also follows other cases picked up by Stevenson and his other coworkers at the Equal Justice Initiative which he started to take on cases of the falsely accused. He faces an extraordinary amount of hardship in fighting for his clients in the corrupt, racist systems they found themselves in, and he talks many times about how he needed hope to give him the strength to keep fighting. At one point in the book he discusses giving talks at local churches about hopefulness. He quotes a Czech leader who said that hope was the only thing that the people of Eastern Europe needed to make it through a time the period of Soviet rule. Stevenson says, "the only thing they needed was hope. Not that pie in the sky stuff, not a preference for optimism over pessimism, but rather 'an orientation of the spirit.' The kind of hope that creates a willingness to position oneself in a hopeless place to be a witness, that allows one to believe in a better future,

even in the face of abuse of power. That kind of hope makes one strong” (Stevenson 2014, 219). This hope is profoundly relevant and is the hope that causes people to fight injustice even when things seem bleak. It is important to note what Stevenson is talking about here. He openly rejects merely adopting an optimistic attitude but rather, talks about genuinely believing that what might seem impossible, can truly come to pass.

I believe this example of hope is also justified according to McCormick’s criteria. The first criterion is the one that is most questionable, but I still think we can say that Stevenson’s case meets it. Though it certainly seems that in the cases Stevenson was dealing with it would not be possible for him to overcome the corrupt systems he was fighting, ultimately he does win the major cases he took on, so there certainly was a possibility of the desired outcome attaining. It is more obvious that Stevenson’s case meets the final criteria. Reversing the sentence of a man falsely accused of murder and fighting a racist system is undeniably a good outcome to hope for. And since hoping for that outcome is what kept Stevenson and others like him fighting for their causes despite the outcome not seeming likely, an added benefit of this hope is that it made the desired outcome more likely.

While I believe that hope should be grounded in reality, and one should believe that what he hopes for is actually possible, hope is also justified by its outcomes. It is so essential, especially in the world we live in today, that we have hope because it is essential in pushing us to strive towards change and a better future. And I believe Christianity provides hope like this. Many argue that Christianity is a vehicle against social change and just forces people to cheerfully accept the world as it is with the hope that they can go to heaven in the future, but this is not correct. NT Wright argues in this book *Surprised by Hope* that the doctrine of the resurrection is key to Christianity and should promote striving towards making the world in a better place in hope of the

resurrection in the future. He says, “It was people who believed robustly in the resurrection, not people who compromised and went in for a mere spiritualized survival, who stood up against Caesar in the first centuries of the Christian era” (Wright 2008, 26). Wright continues to provide other examples throughout history where orthodox Christians with robust theology of the resurrection were in the forefront of social change. One of the reasons that Bryan Stevenson has the hope he does and has made such a profound impact on the world today is because of his Christian beliefs. Hope is so important because without it, so much of the change we so desperately need will never come about. We need hope to keep us working towards a better future in a world that so often looks bleak and devoid of hope, and as I have shown in this section of my paper, Christianity offers that hope.

VI. Christianity and Conspiracy Theories

Up to this point I have given a detailed explanation of why Christian beliefs are justified, but there are many objections to this. Rather than try to cover the numerous specific challenges to Christian belief that have been brought up over the years, I want to bring up an objection to how I have set up my whole argument. The reason I am not going to answer specific objections to Christian belief are that there are too many for me to answer and they lie outside the scope of this paper. Most, if not all, of these objections have been answered elsewhere by philosophers and historians much more qualified than me. For the purpose of this paper I want to discuss an objection to my argument more generally. I argued earlier that Christian belief can be cultivated in such a way that is conducive to intellectual virtues, but this is a controversial claim. One could object that Christian beliefs are adopted in the same intellectually vicious way that many conspiracy theories are, requiring one to be credulous and closed-minded. For the rest of this paper I will argue that this comparison is unwarranted.

There are different views on what the precise definition of a conspiracy theory is, but I will use one of the more derogatory ones. Karl Popper talks about the “Conspiracy Theory of Society” which is “the theory that everything that happens (or at least everything big and bad that happens) is due to a successful conspiracy, that is, that the big bad thing that happens is due to a secret plan to bring about exactly that big bad thing” (Coady 2012, 111-112). Now this is not the most fair treatment of conspiracy theories. Some have evidential support and even turn out to be correct. But the idea which is vital for this section of my paper is the idea that many times conspiracy theories are more driven by the way people think rather than the evidence itself. What I mean by this is that people who believe conspiracy theories will tend to have a lot of evidence for their positions. When one holds to ideas that contradict the established orthodoxy, one must research extensively, but these pieces of evidence will not be properly contextualized. Rather, they will look exclusively for evidence that supports the conclusion that they want to believe and ignore contradictory evidence. Or perhaps they will give evidence that seems to support their argument at first glance, but can be easily explained away, like the strange flight patterns that flat-earthers will bring up.

Quassim Cassam creates the example of Oliver, a man who believes just about every conspiracy theory that there is. He says about this imaginary person, “Those who know him well say that he is easily duped, and you have independent evidence that he is careless in his thinking...” (Cassam 2015). Whether or not there are true conspiracy theories, or one could be justified in believing some of them, it is safe to say that people who frequently latch onto far-fetched conspiracy theories display intellectual vice. Cassam goes as far as to say that we cannot really understand why conspiracy theorists believe the things they do by looking at their reasons, but rather, we must look at their intellectual character.

But what does this have to do with religious beliefs? One could argue that those who hold religious beliefs display the same intellectual vices that one who holds to farfetched conspiracy theories does. Many, particularly those who are more educated, would suggest that for anyone to believe the basic tenets of Christianity, he has to believe things that are patently false and close his mind off to evidence that clearly contradicts his views. Perhaps one might grant that the practical reasons for Christian beliefs are compelling. Christian beliefs may be able to provide a sense of identity, stability, and hope, but they also require intellectual vice to cultivate them. The two intellectual vices that I will focus on in relation to Christian belief are credulity (or gullibility as Cassam puts it) and closed mindedness.

Are Christians gullible? Do people who believe the teachings of the Bible share much in common with those who go to flat-earth conventions? In short, “no.” This does not mean there are no credulous Christians; there are many gullible people in the world, and many of those credulous people are Christians. Recently, I was staying with my grandparents who live in a more rural area and saw an infomercial about miracle water that would mysteriously change your life for the small price of giving your credit card information to a random televangelist. Putting aside the fact that selling miracle water to poor, vulnerable people is something condemned in the Bible, this kind of gullibility is not necessary to accept Christianity or in any way a result of Christian belief. This is merely how a gullible person would approach Christianity.

One of the basic tenets of the Christian faith that is often targeted when talking about credulity is the belief in miracles. I will note that we should be skeptical about miracles. If miracles do, in fact, happen, they happen very rarely, and so when people say that they have performed a miracle, or know someone who has, we obviously should be skeptical about this. But there are some miracles that one must believe in to have anything resembling orthodox

Christian beliefs. The one I will discuss in this paper is the Resurrection of Jesus because it is the center of all Christian belief. It is the basis of everything that a Christian believes. Now David Hume, who has been profoundly influential and whose philosophy has shaped much of modern thinking, rejected the idea that believing in miracles could be epistemically justified. Hume uses the examples of the miracles found in the New Testament to talk about the irrationality of believing in miracles. He says,

“the authority either of the Scripture or of tradition is founded merely in the testimony of the Apostles who were eyewitnesses to those miracles of our by which by which he proved his divine mission. Our evidence then for the truth of the Christian religion is less than for the truth of our senses, because even in the first authors of our religion it was no greater” (Hume 623).

What Hume is saying here is that our only evidence for the miracles in the Bible is testimony of the Apostles who recorded his actions. But we, according to Hume, know that miracles are not likely to happen because we do not experience them in our daily lives, and the majority of people we know have never witnessed a miracle⁵. Hume believes that since we have good evidence that the laws of nature work without exception, we have good reason to refrain from believing in miracles. Hume uses an example that if every historian agreed that on January 1, 1600, Queen Elizabeth died, was viewed by doctors before and after her death, was buried, had her successor announced, and then, a month later she resumed her leadership of the throne, he would not believe that she had genuinely rose from the dead because it would contradict all his experiences, and he would be more sure that her death had been faked or some sinister plot

⁵ And typically, if we do meet someone who has “witnessed a miracle”, they have either been tricked by a malicious person, misled by a well-meaning but credulous person, or have just witnessed something that is statistically unlikely and called it a miracle.

had been carried out than the real occurrence of a miracle (Hume 631). Now Hume does not go on to condemn religious beliefs, but he does conclude one must believe them based purely on faith, and that they cannot be epistemically justified (Hume 632).

Hume is correct that faith is an essential part of believing in the resurrection, and more broadly Christian doctrine, but I think he is wrong to say that there is not a good evidential reason to believe in it. The further problem is that Hume's view of miracles relies on faulty view of weighing evidence. According to Hume, even if there was ample evidence to say that a miracle had happened, you would be wise to still not believe that a miracle had happened because that evidence would be outweighed by one's evidence of miracles not happening. But a problem with Hume's reasoning here is that there is not an obvious way to weigh different pieces of evidence against each other. We might reasonably choose to be skeptical of evidence that seems to point towards miraculous activity because we think there is good evidence that miracles do not happen, but there is not a precise way to determine how to weigh the different pieces of evidence. I will demonstrate this point using a section from *Surprised by Hope*. According to NT Wright, some historical evidence exists for the resurrection of Jesus, such as Jesus's empty tomb and the transformation of his followers from average fishermen to the leaders of what became a major world religion. But there will be many who are unconvinced by this evidence, and the reason is, they believe that there is stronger evidence in favor of resurrections not occurring, and so seek other explanations. These explanations may not fit the historical/circumstantial evidence as well as believing in the Resurrection might, but many would argue, these explanations better fit the entirety of our evidence (particularly the evidence that miracles do not happen). But there is no simple way of determining which evidence should be weighed more heavily. For example, cannot calculate the percentage chance of a miracle occurring. And so, many choose to weigh the

evidence against miracles more heavily. Wright says in response to that, “That is fine; I respect that position; but... it is indeed then a matter of choice, not a matter of saying something called scientific historiography forces us to take that route” (Wright 2008, 63). It is a perfectly reasonable position to give more weight to arguments against miracles, but it is a position that one must just choose, it is not one the evidence forces us into.

We can take from this that Christians are not just credulous for believing in miracles. What is true is that at some point when evaluating evidence regarding certain doctrines or beliefs, one must choose what assumptions to make and what evidence to weigh more heavily. Just because a Christian believer chooses to weigh the historical evidence for a resurrection or any other doctrine more heavily than evidence she has that miracles do not occur often does not make her credulous. Now I will discuss the accusation that Christians are closed-minded.

Most people I know, including myself, know someone who is deeply engrossed in all kinds of crazy conspiracy theories. Typically, when someone like that is presented with evidence that contradicts their conspiracies, the response is to immediately close oneself off to that data. The usual way is to undermine the legitimacy of every media outlet except for some Infowars-like YouTube channel. This is clearly intellectually vicious behavior. Closing one’s mind off to anything that would contradict one’s beliefs is unhealthy, and this way of thinking keeps people stuck believing pernicious conspiracies. It is easy to write off people who act in this way, but some might argue that this is just an exaggerated version of what Christians do. For one thing, as I argued earlier in this paper, Christian experience justifies Christian beliefs. And if we trust our experience, does that not involve writing off all the billions of non-Christians’ experiences? Furthermore, I argued that Christians should have an epistemic partiality towards their beliefs, which again, seems like I am arguing against seriously engaging with views other than my own.

But on further investigation, it becomes clearer that this is not what I am saying. While I argue that we should value our own religious experiences and seriously consider them as evidence, we should never do this at the exclusion of the experience of others. This does not mean that we will not ultimately determine our own experiences to be true religious experiences, but we will not just cut ourselves off from those who disagree with us. This is evidence that must be weighed against our own. And while I argued that we should show epistemic partiality towards our own religious beliefs, I showed that this would ultimately make the believer more open to ideas that contradicted his own because it provides a safe place from which he can explore new ideas. Many people assume Christians are close-minded because they have met close-minded Christians before, but as I have argued in this paper, this should not be the case. Open-mindedness is compatible with Christian belief and should accompany it.

VII. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that there are both evidential and practical factors that justify Christian belief. I have argued that one can have an evidential foundation for believing Christianity based on her religious experience. But I went on to argue that this evidential foundation is bolstered by practical considerations. I emphasized the importance of intellectual loyalty as well as the hope that Christian beliefs provide. In this paper, I did not attempt to come up with some novel arguments in defense of Christian belief. Simply put, I wanted to show that one could be a good thinker and also be a Christian: that one does not have to stop being thoughtful to accept Christian beliefs. I hope to have shown that Christian beliefs should not only be considered acceptable, but a good thing if they are held thoughtfully.

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