


Understanding and Respecting God's Word and World -Faith and Epistemology in Orthodox Religious Communities

Christopher Hancock ¹

Professor, Director Oxford House (Research Ltd), Britain, England

| Article Info | Abstract |
|---|--|
| <p>Article type: Research Article</p> <p>Article history: Received 05 February 2024 Received in revised from 15 February 2024 Accepted 10 March 2024 Published online 05 April 2024</p> <p>Keywords: Theistic Epistemology, Faith and Science, Orthodox Religious Thought, Sacred, Divine Disclosure</p> | <p>This paper explores the epistemological foundations underpinning the relationship between faith and science within orthodox religious communities, particularly through a theological-philosophical lens. Emphasizing a textualist worldview, it argues that the sacred texts of religious traditions—such as the Psalms in the Judeo-Christian canon and the Qur’an in Islam—inform not only spiritual understanding but also perceptions of scientific inquiry and material reality. The paper introduces four epistemological propositions for consideration: the indivisibility of God and the interconnectedness of knowledge; the co-eternity of God and truth; the sanctity of God and all creation; and the coinherence of divine and human speech. Through these propositions, it is posited that orthodox theistic traditions possess the intellectual resources to affirm the legitimacy of science while simultaneously insisting upon its moral accountability. The discussion challenges secular assumptions of epistemological autonomy in science and highlights the theological imperative to view scientific discoveries as part of a divine disclosure rather than isolated human achievement. In doing so, the paper aims to encourage interdisciplinary dialogue that respects the integrity of both scientific and religious inquiry, while advocating for an integrated worldview rooted in theistic epistemology.</p> |
| <p>Cite this article: Hancock, CH. (2024). Understanding and Respecting God's Word and World- Faith and Epistemology in Orthodox Religious Communities. <i>Journal of Contemporary Studies on Religion and Science</i>, 0(2), 35-42.</p> | |
| <div style="display: flex; align-items: center;">  <p>Publisher: Research Institute of Science and Strategic Evolution</p> </div> | |

¹ **Email:** chancock@oxfordhousereseach.com

Introduction

The relationship between faith and knowledge, particularly in the realms of science and religion, is a complex and longstanding topic discussed within theological, philosophical, and epistemological fields. To understand this relationship, it is essential to consider the lens through which one views both religious doctrines and scientific discoveries. The perspective adopted in this interaction significantly influences one's worldview and epistemological stance.

The author identifies as a 'textualist,' meaning they view the world not only through the immediate context but through a framework shaped by both written and unwritten texts, sacred and cultural. The interplay between these texts shapes one's understanding of the world, providing a foundational lens through which religious doctrine and scientific inquiry can be explored and understood.

For over fifty years, the author has been immersed in the Psalms, a foundational text within Abrahamic faith traditions. This sacred text serves not only as a devotional guide but also as a lens through which one engages with the natural world and the relationship between faith and science. For the author, the idea of God's Word and God's world is not a dichotomy but a unified reality, where faith and scientific inquiry do not conflict but instead illuminate and complement each other.

This introduction sets the stage for a discussion on how orthodox religious communities approach the relationship between faith and science, particularly through an epistemological lens that recognizes the indivisibility of God, truth, and knowledge. The text explores how different theological traditions—whether they emphasize the spiritual over the material or integrate both aspects—shape their understanding of the natural world and its relationship to the divine. The goal is to explore how these traditions inform one's understanding of reality and how a theologically grounded epistemology can enrich discussions at the intersection of science and religion. Ultimately, this inquiry aims to clarify how orthodox religious communities, grounded in sacred texts, can navigate the complexities of the modern scientific worldview while staying faithful to their theological convictions.

Textualism

The interaction between faith and knowledge, particularly within the frameworks of science and religion, involves a complex epistemological process. One's approach to understanding these realms often relies on presupposed frameworks, or "texts," both written and unwritten, that shape how individuals perceive the world. These texts include cultural, traditional, educational, religious, and philosophical influences that frame one's understanding of life and the universe.

From an epistemological perspective, it is more productive to approach the world through deliberate frameworks rather than adopting a purely contextual or relativistic stance. A contextualist view, which often surrenders the interpretation of truth to culture, chance, or

circumstance, can lead to a fragmented worldview. In contrast, a "textualist" perspective acknowledges that our minds are conditioned by various influences, both conscious and unconscious. The key is to become self-aware of these conditioning factors and recognize that our perceptions are shaped by prior and ongoing influences.

This framework is particularly relevant when considering the role of religious texts, such as the Psalms in the Judeo-Christian tradition or the Zabur in Islamic tradition, in shaping one's worldview. The Psalms, for example, view the universe as inherently ordered and created by divine will, where natural phenomena reflect the glory of the Creator. Passages like "The heavens declare the glory of God" and "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made" convey that nature is not merely random but reflects divine purpose.

Perceiving the world through such a theological lens has implications for understanding science. Rather than seeing nature as a purely objective system governed by scientific laws, one might interpret it as a creation revealing its Creator. This perspective suggests harmony between faith and science, both as avenues for exploring the same universe, created and sustained by a single divine source.

Furthermore, this theological perspective transcends national or cultural boundaries, providing a unifying framework in academic and global contexts. It fosters an inclusive, global approach to knowledge and faith, recognizing that human boundaries and institutions are ultimately temporary and of limited significance in the grand divine order.

In summary, applying a theological perspective rooted in sacred texts provides a robust framework for engaging with the intersection of science and religion. This approach enriches our understanding of the natural world and fosters unity among diverse human experiences and belief systems, all while maintaining respect for the transcendent and the divine.

Theme, questions and takeaways

In this discussion, I return to the central theme of my inquiry: the relationship between faith and epistemology in orthodox religious communities, framed through the lens of understanding and respecting both *God's word* and *God's world*. Over the course of my teaching and research across various contexts, I have encountered a wide range of so-called "orthodox" communities rooted in multiple faith traditions. While many of these traditions stem from the Abrahamic legacy, others define their identity through fidelity to inherited convictions, sacred texts, and time-honored practices passed down by their forebears.

My observations suggest that such communities often fall into one of two epistemological and existential pitfalls. On the one hand, some become so absorbed in their temporal, worldly responsibilities that they lose sight of their transcendent, spiritual calling. On the other hand, others are so consumed by their heavenly orientation that they neglect their obligations within

the material realm. As it has famously been said of one such figure: “*He was so heavenly minded that he was of no earthly use.*” The consequences for these communities can be serious: they risk living either a fragmented and schizophrenic existence, unsure of their true identity, or one that is disconnected—neither genuinely grounded in earthly reality nor meaningfully attuned to the divine. They may, in short, forget the notion of “dual citizenship,” the simultaneous call to both the temporal and the eternal, and the ethical imperatives of each.

This tension between heaven and earth, spirit and matter, undergirds many of the philosophical and theological dilemmas found in orthodox religious epistemologies. Indeed, the way a tradition conceptualizes the relationship between the material and the immaterial significantly shapes its approach to knowledge, science, and revelation.

One may reasonably ask: what are we to expect of faith traditions that are explicitly disinterested in the material world, emphasizing instead purely spiritual or transcendent realities? Buddhism, along with certain Platonic strains within Western Christianity, may be cited as examples, where enlightenment is seen to lie in liberation from the burdens of corporeality. Conversely, other traditions draw little or no ontological distinction between spirit and matter—such as those influenced by Aristotelian metaphysics, Thomistic Catholicism, Confucianism, or even strands of Daoist philosophy. Still others, such as Protestant Christianity and Hinduism, maintain a dualistic framework in which both realms are acknowledged, yet with the temporal regarded as inherently flawed and the spiritual as perfect, eternal, and ultimately superior.

In each of these frameworks, “orthodoxy” may offer confident answers, yet often leaves lingering epistemological questions. A key takeaway here is that a faith tradition’s conceptualization of the relationship between the material and the spiritual directly informs how it engages with the relationship between science and religion.

To elaborate: if spirit and matter, or heaven and earth, are perceived as ontologically unified, then science and faith are seen not as antagonistic but as complementary means of apprehending reality. They are simply two epistemic paths leading to the same ontological truth. However, if the two are viewed as fundamentally distinct or even oppositional, each domain can claim self-sufficiency. Religious thought may proceed without reference to empirical science, and scientific inquiry may exclude theological or metaphysical considerations entirely. In such cases, orthodox communities may become intellectually insular and impervious to scientific scrutiny, while scientific paradigms evolve independently of religious authorization or critique. This represents a bifurcation of method and purpose—distinct paths to separate epistemological ends.

In contrast, traditions that perceive spirit and matter as partially interconnected may foster occasional dialogue between science and religion, though such engagement tends to be

unsystematic and ad hoc. Intellectual cross-pollination in such cases may emerge, but without necessarily requiring institutional legitimacy or theological endorsement. The dialogue remains exploratory, conditional, and speculative—reflecting the tentative convergence of two disciplines in pursuit of overlapping but ultimately divergent aims.

For both observers and adherents of these varying metaphysical models, self-recognition is vital. But this leads to a crucial philosophical question: on what epistemological or moral grounds are we to assess or critique competing conceptions of the relationship between heaven and earth, spirit and matter—indeed, between God’s word and God’s world?

Four epistemological propositions

In the second half of this brief talk, I want to extrapolate four epistemological propositions from the preceding for orthodox religious communities to consider as they ponder the relationship between science and religion.¹

i. *The indivisibility of God and interconnectedness of knowledge.* Orthodox religious traditions (particularly the three Abrahamic faiths) characteristically articulate comprehensive claims for faith, life, and knowledge. The origin of this is respect for the perfection, unity, and indivisibility of God. More than this, such orthodox religious communities will admit and affirm that, though human knowledge is necessarily partial, divine wisdom and divine knowledge are as perfect and comprehensive as God himself.² In other words, that there is an essential, eternal, indissoluble connection between God and knowledge, so that there is no knowledge without God and no knowledge separate to, or separable from, God. This robust epistemological proposition is part and parcel of what is sometimes called the ‘theistic premise’. That is, that whatever, or whoever God is, by definition and in faith, God is central to the universe of human thought, life, speech, morality and understanding. As I was once firmly reminded by the very fine former President of the Society of Christian Philosophers in the US, William Alston, philosophers are often better at recognizing and safe-guarding the full implications of the ‘theistic premise’ than theologians – particularly progressive ones!

Seen in this light, if, or when, faith seeks scientific understanding it does so believing scientific discoveries of any and every kind cannot, and will not, ultimately undermine God’s sovereign status and comprehensive knowledge. Hence the confidence with which Psalm 19.1 states, ‘The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands’, and,

¹ As an exercise in comparative philosophy, there are parallels in what follows to the epistemology of the Turkish Sunni scholar Bediuzzaman Said Nursi’s (1877-1960), *Risale-i Nur Collection* (ca. 1910-1950). On this, R. Embong, ‘Knowledge in the Quran and the Sunnah Leading to an Epistemology’, *Qeios* (12 March 2024): <https://www.qeios.com/read/DOIWI6>; accessed 6 December 2024.

² Cf. as in the Islamic concept of *Tawhid*, classic statements of the indivisibility of God include the dynamic notion of ‘making one’ or ‘asserting oneness’.

likewise, Psalm 33.6, declares 'By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth'. God's word¹ illuminates the essentially theological foundation for life, thought, and understanding. Of course, secular philosophy and rational science may not want to begin here, but orthodox religious communities can, and I would argue, *must* always begin here.

ii. *The co-eternity of God and truth.* Building on this first point, the second key epistemological proposition orthodox religious communities might consider, as they ponder the relationship between science and religion, is the co-eternity of God and truth.² Put another way, they will resist the notion that humans discover something that is not, and has not always been, known to God. As if there were knowledge not known to God, or new knowledge that humans discover.

Seen in this light, what we call 'scientific discoveries' are more aptly named 'divine disclosures' or 'revealed truths. To secular philosophy and atheist empiricism, this may sound demeaning of human endeavour or be dismissed as a crude quest for theological dominance. Better, perhaps, to see it as a theo-logical consequence of a robust re-statement of the 'theistic premise' and an entirely justified (and long overdue) push back against modernity's presumptuous claim for the hegemony of science. What's more, the subordinate and imperfect nature of all human activity in Abrahamic faith traditions, validates criticism of human hubris (and its claims to 'discovery') and a cautious approach to scientific and intellectual experiment (lest they disrespect in any way God's glory, sanctity, creation and comprehensive claim to all that is ultimately good and true); as Psalm 119.89 proclaims, 'Your word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens.'

iii. *The sanctity of God and all God creates.* My last two epistemological propositions are allied to, if not deduced from the first two. Hence, my third relates to *the sanctity of God and all God creates*. Even in orthodox religious traditions that draw a clear distinction between spirit and matter, heaven and earth, there is often some sense of a transference of characteristics and qualities from God to his world, and especially to the zenith of his creation, humanity.³ Hence, the world – be it product of natural evolution or direct divine creation – in all its organic and inorganic forms, possesses by transference some inherent value. But let's be clear, though, this value is *contingent* on God and *not inherent* to the world, lest the world be idolized or deified (as happens too often today in eco-centric philosophies and their theological counterparts). Rather, as Psalm 8 famously charts, there is a legitimate return journey that orthodox faith may

¹ Classically enshrined in the Islamic 'Be!' of God's authoritative creative act.

² *Pace* Islam's naming of God in the Quran as *al-Haqq*, the 'truth' (also, 'right' and 'reality'), which is transferred by direct extension into the truth of the Quran and moral expectation of truthfulness among the faithful.

³ On Islam and the pre-eminent. Unmediated, creation of humanity (with four aspects, viz. physical, spiritual, natural [*fiṭrah*] and light), see Z. Shakir, 'The Human in the Qur'an', *Renovatio* (5 June 2018): <https://renovatio.zaytuna.edu/article/the-human-in-the-quran>; accessed 6 December 2024.

take from wonder at God's creation to wonder at humanity back to glorifying God the creator.¹ Hence, the Psalm begins, 'O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!', and then continues in verses 3-5,

When I consider the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars, which you have set in place, what is man (or humanity) that you are mindful of him (and her), the son of man (humanity) that you care for him (and her)? You made him/them a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him/them with glory and honour.

Here, the inherent status and value of humanity are clear, *and* God's role in establishing them.

Here is a 'window word', I suggest, through which orthodox Abrahamic faiths may view both the natural and human sciences. Here is encouragement to honour faithful enquiry that recognizes the innate value and excellence, gifts, and qualities, that testify to humanity's contingent nature as a glorious divine creation. Here, too, is discouragement of every form of interpretation and experimentation that discredit, de-humanize, or demean, 'the son of man', who is by God 'made a little lower than the angels. Hereby, too, unaccountable genetic or social engineering, organ harvesting, and a Marxistic reduction of humans to units of labour, are theologically proscribed.

iv. *The coinherence of divine and human speech.* My last epistemological proposition is again allied to, if not derived from, the first two; namely, *the coinherence of divine and human speech*. In addition to the transference of inherent qualities and value from God as creator to humanity and all creation, most orthodox religious communities extend divine activity to the inspiration of sacred texts and the formation and functioning of human speech.² However the 'inspiration' of holy texts is defined or explained, these texts are honoured witnesses, as the Psalms testify, to the mysterious impact of Almighty God on the mind, soul, memory, and will, of individuals and communities. So, praise and blessing, confession, questioning and cursing, issue from the mind of God through the mouth of man. More than this, the act of human communication, through audible speech and intelligible touch and sense, is a response to expressible and inexpressible realities that the divine mind has mediated, and still mediates, to his creation. In short, without God, human communication evaporates in the cacophony of Babel and the bitterness of war.

There are two important consequences of this coinherence of divine and human speech. First, human speech is boundaried by divine orders and ordering, so it cannot say anything it likes. Lies and defamation, criticism and calculation, are scrutable by God's truth and justice. Second,

¹ Cf. Q. 2. 157, '... to God we belong and to Him shall we return'.

² M. Z. Ibrahim, "Models of Communication in the Qur'an: Divine-Human Interaction," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 22, no. 1 (2005): 70-95.

human speech is empowered by its divine origin and author to speak confidently of all God is and does.¹ As illustrated by our appeal to the Psalms and reaffirmation of the ‘theistic premise’, orthodox faith can – indeed, must – inhabit the words, works, and world of God without shame, duplicity, or embarrassment. Seen in this light, scientific discourse is also both accountable and legitimate. But *not* as an independent human activity; rather, as a discipline in search of its true vocation as a worthy expression of contingent being, in search of truths about realities God, the creator, has determined.

Orthodox religious epistemology is, then as all this suggests, *always* morally potent and to be seen as *theologically accountable*.

Conclusion

I hope this brief philosophical-theological overview of epistemological issues related to science and religion provides a suitable foundation for your subsequent discussions. I leave you with three personal reflections.

First, the legitimacy of theological reflection and commentary on scientific inquiry—indeed, its essential role in both inspiring and guiding it.

Second, the illegitimacy—or at the very least, the harm and potential danger—of scientific inquiry conducted without accountability to a clear philosophical, theological, and therefore moral framework.

Third, the potential for dialogue between science and religion to unite and energize orthodox religious communities in resisting the proud secular claims to scientific hegemony, and the dehumanizing anthropologies that too often follow in its wake. As the Psalms remind us: “Your word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens”². Or, as the Quran declares, ‘The creation and the command belong to Him [alone]. Blessed is Allah – Lord of all worlds!’³

References

The Holy Qur'an

The Holy Bible

Alston, William P. "Some Reflections on the Early Days of the Society of Christian Philosophers." *Faith and Philosophy* 15 (1998): 141–143.

Alston, William P. "What is Distinctive About the Epistemology of Religious Belief?" In *The Rationality of Theism*, edited by Godehard Brüntrup and Ronald K. Tacelli, 45–63. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999.

Alston, William P. "Religious Beliefs and Values." *Faith and Philosophy* 18 (2001): 36–49.

Ibrahim, M. Z. “Models of Communication in the Qur’an: Divine–Human Interaction.” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 22, no. 1 (2005): 70–95.

¹ Historic debates within (NB. to some scholars, also between) Christianity on the propriety of ‘apologetics’ (the rational defense of belief/s) and Islam over the character, status and validity of *kalam* (also, *Ilm al-kala* and *ilm al-lahut*) frequently involve discussion of the legitimacy of human rational reflection on the fundamentals of faith.

² Psalm 119.89

³ Qur'an 7:54