

# The Logic of Mission: Re-Thinking the Epistemology of Christian Missiology

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay offers a critique of the nonfoundational theoretical framework which undergirds a number of approaches to contemporary missiology. In its place, it proposes a particularist approach to the study of Christian mission. On this approach, we do not try to glue our missiological reflection on the top of a theory such as Thomas Kuhn's paradigm shifts. On the contrary, this epistemological orientation requires us to begin with what we think we already know about both (a) the context and (b) the gospel before (c) evaluating how all that knowledge fits together.

## 1. Introduction

Epistemology comprises a variety of different sub-disciplines which examine particular academic subjects in detail.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most prominent of these is the epistemology of science (Merritt, 2020). Nevertheless, the epistemology of mathematics (Maddy 2011), ethics (Feldman, 1998), history (Sturm 2011), and even theology have all been explored. With regard to the latter, the seminal text has been *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology* (2017), edited by the late William Abraham (1947–2021) and Frederick Aquino (1963–). Essentially this volume “carves out” the “landscape” in order to create a “space for constructive work in epistemology” as it “crops up in theology” (Abraham and Aquino 2017, 2). A range of contributors discuss some of the epistemic concepts within theology, including the “Knowledge of God” (Greco 2017), “Revelation” (Menssen and Sullivan 2017) and “Authority” (Zagzebski 2017). There are also a number of essays on some of the more general epistemic concepts related to theology, including “Scepticism” (Dunaway and Hawthorne 2017), “Understanding” (Kvanvig 2017), “Virtue” (Baehr 2017), and “Testimony” (Lackey 2017). Finally, it closes with some explorations concerning what might be deemed some of the emerging conversations in relation for example to “Pentecostalism” (Smith 2017), “liberation theology” (Singh 2017), and so on.

A notable omission in these reflections are the epistemological issues that arise within the area of Christian missiology. Here it should be acknowledged that, during his lifetime, Abraham tentatively explored these questions in his works on the *Logic of Evangelism* (Abraham 1989) and the *Logic of Renewal* (Abraham 2002). Tragically, he died before offering a detailed epistemological analysis of this subject. Nevertheless, in *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation* Abraham suggests, in a footnote, that it would be interesting to “track down the extraordinary influence” of Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) on Christian thought (Abraham 2006, 25). This essay will begin this work by exploring how Kuhn's epistemological orientation has influenced contemporary missiology before proceeding to outline an alternative approach to the logic of mission.

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<sup>1</sup> I dedicate this essay to the late William James Abraham and to Oliver Crisp (who first encouraged me to study Abraham's work). I also want to thank Stephen Skuce and Tim Macquiban for all their support.

## 2. Thomas Kuhn and the Structure of Missiological Revolutions

In his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* Kuhn portrays the history of science as a series of revolutions in which one conceptual framework is succeeded by another (Kuhn 1975). In a manner similar to that of the philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine (Wray 2021, 72–73), Kuhn suggests that there are no objective criteria for deciding between alternative scientific paradigms, given that different conceptual frameworks can equally account for the same data (Kuklick 2003, 269–271). Quine writes:

The conceptual scheme of science [is] a tool. . . . Physical objects are conceptually imported, into the situation as convenient intermediaries . . . as irreducible posits comparable, epistemologically, to the gods of Homer. . . . [I] believe in physical objects and not in Homer's gods. . . . But in point of epistemological footing the physical objects and the gods differ only in degree and not in kind. Both sorts of entities enter our conception only as cultural posits. The myth of physical objects is epistemologically superior . . . as a device for working a manageable structure into the flux of experience (Quine 1964, 44).

To be clear, the above should not be interpreted as saying that scientific enquiry is no better than Greek mythology. Nevertheless, in this extract Quine is arguing that there are essentially no objective criteria for choosing between alternative conceptual schemes. Kuhn's account of the history of science is rooted in a similar (nonfoundationalist) perspective in that he too believes that the choice between two different paradigms is ultimately determined by faith:

The man who embraces a new paradigm . . . must often do so in defiance of the evidence. . . . He must that is have faith that the new paradigm will succeed. . . . A decision of that kind can only be made on faith . . . very few men desert a tradition for these reasons alone. Often those who do turn out to have been misled. But if a paradigm is ever to triumph it must gain some first supporters, men who will develop it to the point where hardheaded arguments can be produced and multiplied. . . . Because scientists are reasonable men, one or another argument will ultimately persuade many of them. . . . Rather than a single group conversion, what occurs is an increasing in the distribution of personal allegiances (Kuhn 1975, 158).

Thus, Kuhn's narration of the history of successive scientific paradigms challenges the idea that scientific theories offer objective descriptions of reality and, like Quine, presupposes that each successive conceptual framework is essentially on the same (nonfoundationalist) epistemological footing.

### 2.1 The Impact of Kuhn's Paradigm Thesis on Christian Missiology

What has all this to do with missiology? Well, Kuhn's thesis has influenced Christian missiologists as far afield as American Southern Baptists and South Korean Presbyterians (Eitel 2000, 114–115; Gue Lee 2003, 141–144). Indeed the impact of Kuhn's work on Christian missiology is both global and interdenominational (Pham 2010). Catholics (Lusambili 2022; Fergusson 1984), Orthodox (Dragne 2018; Vassiliadis 2005), Lutherans

(Nessan 2019; Wan 2017), Reformed (Roxborough 2018), Baptists (Johnson 1999), and Pentecostals (Bush 1999; Camp 1994) all utilize his model of paradigm analyses. Indeed, there are a plethora of publications using Kuhn's model to study Christian Mission including, but not limited to, missiological studies originating in Asia (Nguyen Kim 2019; Kanjamala 2014; Fujino 2010; Bae Kim 2009; Antone 2008; Utsunomiya 2003), the Americas (Law 2012), Africa (Biwul 2018; Nel 2011), and Europe (Corrie 2008; Vähäkangas 2007; Ahlstrand 2003). However, the seminal text in the transmission of Kuhn's conceptual framework to missiology is David Bosch's *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (1991).

## 2.2 Bosch's Transforming Mission

Bosch has been described as the most important missiologist of the twentieth century and his work has had an enormous impact on contemporary missiology (Walls, 2002, 273; Reppenhagen and Guder 2016, 533; Corrie 2001, 4). Translated into several languages, including Chinese, Korean, French, Indonesian, Italian, Russian, Spanish, Japanese, Turkish, and many others, his work *Transforming Mission* is "one of the most influential missiological textbooks worldwide" (Kritzinger and Saayman 2011, xi; Vanhoozer 2010, 37). Referred to as a "milestone" in "Missiological thought" this publication is generally understood to be "the point of departure for any future work in the same field" (Schreiter 1991, 180; Hwa 1992, 323). Essentially Bosch offered missiologists "a way of thinking about mission" which, they believed, enabled them to hold both a "particular context" and the authority of the Bible in a "creative tension" (Corrie 2016, 204). This last point indicates that Bosch's main legacy is conceptual. However, whatever the case may be, his transmission of Kuhn's paradigm model has resonated with a wide variety of commentators.

In *Transforming Mission*, Bosch offers a history of successive theological paradigms wherein the concept of mission is continually being reformulated into a "pluriverse" of different definitions. Like Kuhn, who argued that incommensurate scientific theories remain examples of science, even if there is no objective way to choose between them, Bosch maintains that totally different paradigms of Christian mission (i.e., Eastern, Medieval, Reformed, Enlightenment, etc.) remain mission (Bosch 2004, 511). So far so good; however, though Kuhn is right to observe that in a scientific revolution new theories can disregard concepts, methods, and criteria in outmoded scientific paradigms, Bosch recognises that:

For the Christian a paradigm shift can only be carried out on the basis of the gospel and . . . never however against the gospel. Contrary to the natural sciences, theology relates not only to the present and to the future, but also to the past, to tradition, to God's primary witness to humans. . . . [Thus relevance] may never be pursued at the expense of God's revelation in and through the history of Israel and supremely, the event of Jesus Christ. Christians take seriously the epistemological priority of their classical text, the Scriptures (Bosch 2004, 187).

Thus, while Bosch adopts Kuhn's epistemological orientation, he tries simultaneously to retain a fixed point "the gospel"—from which it will be possible to determine the validity of different paradigms—a "point of orientation" which "all Christians (should) share" and on the "basis of which" dialogue between them becomes possible (Bosch 2004, 187). In effect, it might be argued that missiologists like Bosch want to have their cake and eat it—trying to preserve the "supercultural message of the gospel" while arguing that all versions

of it are culturally bound (Bosch 2004, 367; Hesslegrave and Rommen 1989, 2).<sup>2</sup> For example, Corrie believes that this paradigm model has bequeathed an enduring legacy to missiology in that it has enabled a plethora of writers to affirm, in “creative tension,” the “supracultural truth” of the Bible and the “insights” of the “context” (Corrie 2016, 200).<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, Kuhn’s epistemological orientation does not offer a reason as to why the Bible should act as a “supercultural” criteria for the good news. Indeed, it would seem that on this theory of knowledge “no statement is immune to revision” when one paradigm succeeds another—indeed if one makes “drastic adjustments elsewhere in the system” then anything “can be held [as] true” on this theory (Quine 1964, 43).

### 2.3 Hard and Soft Interpretations of Kuhn

It should be acknowledged here that there are different interpretations given to Kuhn’s work. A harder, “anti-foundationalist” interpretation is taken by Richard Rorty who considered that Kuhn’s work undermined the very idea that scientists offer an objective description of reality. He thus argued that there is no normative foundation or criteria which can enable us to adjudicate between different scientific descriptions of reality (Rorty 1979, 323). Like Quine, he argued that new paradigms are nothing more than sophisticated linguistic descriptions (Rorty 1989, 9). This “anti-foundationalist” interpretation would indicate that this epistemological orientation offers little to the subject of Christian mission given that its very existence as a subject implies that the “gospel” has something to say to all cultures. Put simply, if one assumes the nonfoundationalist premise, that all descriptions of reality are essentially revisable, then surely that “gospel” is itself revisable. However, there is a softer interpretation that merits our attention at this juncture.

Stephen Toulmin has argued that Kuhn’s paradigm shifts “never really amount” to entirely different worldviews in that “discontinuities on the theoretical level” obscure “continuities” at a “methodological level” (Toulmin 1972, 105). The theologian Hans Küng may be taken as an example of this softer interpretation in that he stresses the continuity between different paradigms—highlighting Kuhn’s acknowledgment that they are informed by the same empirical data and generally uphold significant features of past scientific achievements (Küng 1989, 30).<sup>4</sup> At a missiological level, Bosch suggests that the Bible acts as a common source for the different paradigms of mission—that different conceptions of mission emerge (methodologically) from reading the Bible (Bosch 2004, 187). However, even if we assume that different theologies of mission utilize the same data (the scriptures) and ultimately the same method (hermeneutics) we are still faced with a difficulty. What is there to prevent incommensurate conceptions emerging from different interpretations? If different missional paradigms utilize the “same bundle of data”—the scriptures—what is to prevent Biblical Unitarian (i.e., Christadelphian) and other non-trinitarian theologies of mission from developing? Therefore, even on its softest terms, it is difficult to see what this epistemological outlook has to offer those who would seek to proclaim “the gospel” in diverse cultural settings. In short, while they rightly want to affirm (a) the particularity and value of specific cultural contexts, they (b) cling to a vision of Christianity that transcends these cultural limitations. What is surely needed is an epistemological outlook appropriate to the task at hand. Thus, having highlighted some of

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<sup>2</sup> Bosch argues that, in the case of each paradigm shift, the “creative tension between the new and the old” begets “reform not replacement” (Bosch 2004, 367).

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion, see (Kritzinger 2000; Corrie 2008; Cueva 2015; Weir 2015). While critical of this point, I remain eternally grateful for Corrie’s role in my baptism.

<sup>4</sup> Küng’s earlier work on Hegel suggests that he conflates Kuhn’s approach with that of the former in that he attempts to locate an essence within the various historical paradigms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For further discussion see: (Küng 1989, 160–164)

the difficulties posed by Kuhn's position, I want to explore an alternative epistemological particularist approach to the study of mission (Chisholm 1973).

### 3. A Particularist Approach to the Logic of Mission

Imagine for a moment that a philosopher advances an epistemological theory which challenges your belief that you have two hands. If you know that you have two hands, should you believe this theory—even if it seems to be very sophisticated (Abraham 2006, 35)? This scenario puts us in a difficult position and raises the following question:

Which should come first: a method or set of criteria for determining when we have a bit of knowledge, or *particular* examples of knowledge, in terms of which we can determine criteria? Those who give pre-eminence to method of criteria may be called *methodists*, and those who give pre-eminence to particular examples (e.g., my knowledge that I have two hands) may be called *particularists* (Sosa 1991, 158).

Here we are offered an alternative approach to epistemology, one that allows us to retain our belief that we have two hands. Thus, instead of presupposing a particular philosophical theory that rules out knowledge we already possess, the epistemological particularist begins instead with knowledge. With this knowledge in place, they then (and only then) begin an appraisal of the knowledge claims in hand, which are evaluated retrospectively in a manner appropriate to the subject.<sup>5</sup>

An obvious criticism of this approach is that it cooks the books in advance—assuming what we know is valid before testing it. However, if in order to know something it is first necessary to have a rule that specifies when a piece of knowledge is true (a method/criterion), and if it is impossible to know if this criterion works unless one already knows what true knowledge is, then those who would begin with a theory about what constitutes knowledge are equally guilty—assuming at the outset that their chosen method or criterion is valid.<sup>6</sup> The particularist begins instead with (i) those instances of knowledge which are already in their possession. They then, and only then, (ii) examine how they know these things. Thus, as far as epistemology is concerned, Christian mission can legitimately begin from a position of knowledge. However, what kind of knowledge claims are we are talking about here?

#### 3.1 Epistemological Particularism and Religious Knowledge

At this juncture it is helpful to show how knowledge of the gospel might be deemed tenable on this particularist theory of knowledge. In addition to William Abraham, who was mentioned earlier, it might be argued that a prominent example of this epistemological approach (in religious studies) is Alvin Plantinga.<sup>7</sup> For example, Boone maintains that, like Chisholm, Plantinga's epistemological orientation begins with (i) clear cases of knowledge and then (ii) retrospectively examines them to determine a criterion for knowledge (Boone 2021, 147). For example, in his ground-breaking work, *God and Other Minds*, Plantinga argues that belief in God, though it may be impossible to demonstrate absolutely, is

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<sup>5</sup> This particularist position is to be contrasted with that of epistemological methodism (not to be confused with the Christian denomination founded by John Wesley), which begins epistemology with a criterion/method of how accurate knowledge is attained (Chisholm 1973, 1–2).

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion, see Hankinson (2002, 727–728) and Chisholm (1973, 3).

<sup>7</sup> For Plantinga's engagement with Chisholm, see Plantinga (1991, 75–77).

reasonable in the same manner that belief in other minds is rational—even if it cannot be demonstrated (Plantinga 1967, 271). Given the epistemic parity of these beliefs, and given that belief in other minds is an assumption practically necessary for human life, Plantinga maintains that both beliefs (theism and the belief in other minds) may be considered rationally acceptable (Boone 2021, 147). Moreover, like Chisholm, Plantinga considers it reasonable to begin epistemology with basic knowledge claims like these:

[T]he proper way to arrive at such a criterion is, broadly speaking, *inductive*. We must assemble examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are obviously properly basic in the latter, and examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are obviously *not* properly basic in the latter. We must then frame hypotheses as to the necessary and sufficient conditions of proper basicity and test these hypotheses by reference to those examples (Plantinga 1981, 50).

Thus, like Chisholm, Plantinga seems to begin with examples of knowledge and then formulates criteria to evaluate that knowledge.<sup>8</sup> In his *Warrant* trilogy, Plantinga formulates criteria for these naturally occurring beliefs, arguing that they are “warranted” if they are (1) “produced in me by cognitive faculties that are working properly” in a “cognitive environment that is appropriate,” (2) the “segment of the design plan governing the production of that belief” is designed to produce true beliefs, and (3) there is a strong probability that a belief formed under those circumstances will be accurate (Plantinga 1993, 46–47). For example, he maintains that belief in God, like belief in the external world, is a naturally occurring belief. He considers this belief to be warranted as it arises through the proper functioning of our basic belief-forming mechanisms.<sup>9</sup> Thus, being made in the image of God, human beings are able to know the reality of God through the proper functioning of their spiritual faculties through a *sensus divinitus* (Plantinga 2000, ch 6). Plantinga thus proposes that, in a manner comparable to intuition, memory, perception, and reason, human beings have a natural capacity to sense divine revelation. Having illustrated how knowledge of God might be defended according to this theory, it is helpful at this juncture to discuss William Abraham’s account of how this epistemological orientation might be related to knowledge of the Christian tradition more generally (Abraham 2006, 47–50).

The task of Christian mission must begin with a robust vision of God. To initiate converts into the riches of the Christian tradition entails the transmission of a complex web of beliefs. Indeed, the content of the Christian faith may be described as a “cluster of propositions that hang together in some sense as a whole” (Abraham 2006, 46). This raises questions about the practicality of Plantinga’s ingenious approach for our present purposes. For example, while acknowledging his monumental contribution to the field, Abraham illustrates a danger in Plantinga’s religious epistemology. He writes:

We cannot discover the truth or falsehood of the doctrine of the trinity by inspection . . . to appeal to the *sensus divinitus*, to its repair in redemption and to the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit . . . is to rely on various, selected components of the canonical heritage to support other components . . . *prima facie* it seems odd to privilege these . . . surely we

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<sup>8</sup> To clarify, while belief in God may be deemed “properly basic,” Plantinga rejects the idea that this permits us to believe anything and everything. On the contrary, he his position is rather that a belief “is properly basic” when it arises automatically in the right circumstances. For further discussion see Plantinga (1981, 44) and Boone (2021, 147–167)

<sup>9</sup> For a different approach, but similar epistemological orientation, see William Alston’s *Perceiving God* (1991).

need to know why, say, the claim about the inner witness of the Holy Spirit is more secure or privileged than, say, the doctrine of the Trinity. To rework these theological claims into a network of proposals about God's design plan for proper cognitive functioning is a major stretch (Abraham 2006, 48).

Whether or not this assessment of Plantinga is correct, Abraham's desire is to start the epistemological journey with much more in the theological bag. Indeed, it seems his central concern relates to the epistemological position of the inner witness of the Holy Spirit in Plantinga's theory. Essentially, he suggests that predicating central doctrines (such as the Trinity) on the inner witness of the Holy Spirit could inadvertently lead to a rationalization of the church's vast canonical heritage. It is perhaps for this reason that Abraham actually categorizes Plantinga's work as being representative of the "Standard" epistemological methodist strategy (which presupposes criterion to knowledge). Whether or not Abraham is correct, it would appear from the above that Plantinga is not sufficiently particularist for the task in hand.

Rather than categorizing certain doctrines (the inner witness of the Holy Spirit) as properly basic, I want instead to pursue a similar strategy to Abraham's. This entails a reversal of the "Standard" way of doing things. He writes:

Rather than securing a[n epistemological] method and then seeing what results it give us, let us identify a particular brand of theism and then ask what would be the appropriate way to adjudicate its intellectual status. In this scenario we begin with a robust vision of theism; we then stand back and ask what would be the appropriate way to think about working out whether it is rational or irrational (Abraham 2006, 13).

On the basis of the above, it is possible to begin the epistemology of mission with a robust vision of God in the bag. In reality, it is fundamental to the task at hand that the missionary sets out with a clear vision of the particular brand of Christianity they seek to proclaim. They cannot start this work, as it were, with nothing in their head. While this may raise epistemological alarm bells, Abraham points out that this is not something new in the field. For example, he emphasizes that "in exploring perceptual claims we begin with those we actually have" (Abraham 2006, 13). The same strategy may be used here. The missionary can begin from within their particular Christian tradition. This is not, for a moment, to suggest that the missionary's tradition is immune to critique. On the contrary, the tradition may be refuted or it may be placed under severe intellectual strain (Abraham 2006, 46–47). Indeed, the missiologist, like the scientist and historian, should embrace a number of epistemic platitudes, which they are in no position to prove or disprove. Abraham helpfully identifies some of these platitudes, including but not limited to: (1) the reliability of the senses, (2) the value of reason, (3) memory, (4) testimony, (5) judgment, (6) that some beliefs are properly basic, (6) that many of our beliefs occur naturally, (7) that different disciplines require different levels of precision, and (8) the important role played by language and culture. For our present purposes, it is clear that this last point requires further consideration before proceeding further (Abraham 2006, 35–40).

The knowledge gleaned from centuries of Christian (mal)practice and missiological reflection may be taken as an epistemic platitude from which we can legitimately depart (Abraham 2006, 36–38; Walls 1986, 3; Bosch 2004, 230). Thus, we may safely assume (on the basis of a plethora of history books about the evils of colonialism) that Christian mission must begin by presupposing (a) the particularity and value of specific cultural

contexts.<sup>10</sup> For example, within the Catholic church's teaching, this is now a guiding principle (Abbott 1967, 660). Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that for many centuries "supernatural revelation" was officially denied to those outside the Christian tradition. This view influenced the church for centuries, denying humankind the natural inclination or possibility of acquiring the knowledge and grace of God (Ruokanen 1992, 8).<sup>11</sup> Grace was "something so totally extraneous and alien to human nature that anything and everything natural and human was downgraded and demeaned" (Kerr 1997, 115). This shaped the church's view of other cultures and religious traditions profoundly and has had a detrimental impact upon the history of Christian mission.<sup>12</sup> However, over the centuries there has been a gradual shift.<sup>13</sup> For example, at Vatican II, "Lumen Gentium" (Abbott 1967, 183), "Ad Gentes" (Abbott 1967, 584), and "Gaudium Et Spes" (Abbott 1967, 199),<sup>14</sup> affirmed that those outside the church may come to know truth and grace.<sup>15</sup> To paraphrase "Nostra Aetate" (Abbott 1967, 660), Christian mission ought begin (as a matter of principle) by (a) recognizing, preserving, and promoting all the good things, spiritual, and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found within the worldview upheld in the context of mission.<sup>16</sup> All these should be presupposed and taken as knowledge. Indeed, any information about that context should be taken in this vein. At the same time, Christian mission must presuppose (b) a knowledge of the "gospel." Whatever manifestation Christianity has taken, it has tended (overwhelmingly) to claim some knowledge about God, something which its adherents believe they must share with the world.

These two principles form a starting point from which Christian mission begins. This precisely is the reason why Kuhn's epistemological outlook is problematic—it does not allow us to affirm both (a) and (b). Nevertheless, wherever (a) and (b) seem to be opposed it will also be necessary to (c) offer an appraisal of the knowledge claims in hand, which are evaluated retrospectively in a manner appropriate to the subject. Therefore, having indicated that a particularist approach to Christian mission allows us to retain these principles, it is necessary to elaborate upon (a) and (b) and on (c) how these respective sources of knowledge can be evaluated in an appropriate manner.

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<sup>10</sup> For an example of Portuguese, German, French, and English Christian-Colonial malpractice in Cameroun, see Pratt Morris-Chapman (2022b). For examples of Italian Christian-Colonial malpractice, see Boca (1976, 33–35) and Sillani (1936, 17).

<sup>11</sup> For further discussion, see Di Noia (1997, 125) and De Lubac (1969).

<sup>12</sup> A different view was outlined by Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), who contended that "the created intellect can be proportioned to know God." For further discussion see Aquinas (1920, 12.1) and Ruokanen (1992, 11).

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Aquinas's view is echoed in the teaching of Vatican I: "By enduring agreement the Catholic Church has held and holds that there is a twofold order of knowledge, distinct not only in principle but also in object: (I) in principle, indeed, because we know in one way by natural reason, in another by divine faith." For further discussion see Denzinger (1955, para 1795).

<sup>14</sup> *Gaudium Et Spes* states that "in the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths" (Abbott 1967, 199 para 16).

<sup>15</sup> For further discussion, see Abbott (1967).

<sup>16</sup> *Nostra Aetate* affirms the need to "recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among" other faith traditions and cultures (Abbott 1967, 660 para 2).

### 3.2 Knowledge of the Cultural Group/Context in Which the Mission Will Take Place

On the particularist orientation proposed in this essay, all the knowledge available (written or otherwise) about the setting (a) in which a Christian mission will take place is taken as a starting point. This of course raises a set of questions relating to epistemic authority (Greco 2017, 23–24). If all the knowledge available is taken as a starting point, how do we determine the most pertinent information relevant to the mission? At this juncture it can be helpful to attend to what has been described as the “social turn” in epistemology, which explores how the knowledge individuals possess arises within groups.<sup>17</sup> Thus an outside individual (the missionary) whose knowledge of the setting may have been transmitted through a written text is in a different epistemic position from an insider who has been formed within the cultural group.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, not all insiders within the group will have the same level of understanding of the tradition and culture they inhabit.<sup>19</sup> Within the cultural group there will likely be internal criteria for what constitutes an “expert” and a “non-expert.” This may be institutional, but it may not be, depending on the setting under discussion. Moreover, in addition to experts within the context, there might also be people who transmit information to others. This latter group may not be experts but may be competent communicators who ably hand down the knowledge possessed by the group faithfully—according to the rules/criteria internal to the group in question (Greco 2017, 23–24). The relevant epistemic authorities within the cultural setting will thus need to be carefully attended to by the missionary.

### 3.3 Knowledge of the Gospel/the Christian Tradition from Which the Mission Originates

Knowledge of “the gospel” (b) is also a starting point. However, rather than assuming that the Bible alone universally determines the gospel that will be preached, it is important to recognize that the reception of a text is shaped by a person’s background and indeed the tradition which shapes them. Thus, Christians acquire their knowledge of “the gospel” from traditions which mediate the Christian faith to them. Thus, at the beginning, we can assume that all the contents of the tradition under discussion are knowledge. However, as indicated above, while the scriptures and indeed the tradition may be taken as knowledge, it is clear that within this tradition there are experts and non-experts who possess greater degrees of epistemic authority. According to Zagzebski, whose essay in the *Epistemology of Theology* explores the question of epistemic authority, “all communities” including religious communities “have a division of epistemic labour . . . church leaders have a teaching role,” theologians “take the lead on the internal reflections of the community,” and philosophers have a role in “clarifying” concepts (Zagzebski 2017, 109). Though Zagzebski does not discuss the missionary’s epistemic authority within the religious community, it can be inferred that his/her assigned role is also endowed by the sending community with epistemic authority for the purpose of transmitting this particular Christian tradition within a new culture. This would suggest that not everybody can be a missionary. On this basis it would need to be someone who the relevant authorities within the tradition deem to have:

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<sup>17</sup> For further discussion, see Aquino’s insightful work *Communities of Informed Judgment* (2004).

<sup>18</sup> Let me clarify that while I want to affirm the insights in what has been termed the “insider/outsider problem” in culture/religion, I do so without adopting the epistemological proposals implicit within much of this literature. For further discussion, see McCutcheon (1999 1–2), Geertz (1973, 7), and Lindbeck (1984 20).

<sup>19</sup> For further discussion, see Kvanvig (2017, 175).

- bi) An understanding of and a capacity to transmit their tradition faithfully
- bii) An anthropological aptitude to comprehend the new setting accurately
- biii) A level of intellectual and spiritual competence—enabling them to discern, evaluate, and sift through all this data (bi and bii)

In relation to this last point, Aquino’s essay on “Spiritual Formation, Authority and Discernment” in the same volume is helpful. While his focus is upon spiritual leaders within a community, his insights on this suggest that three other factors are relevant to the selection of a missionary:

- biv) Worthiness—a way of life which embodies the values of the tradition
- bv) Religious experience which coheres with and reinforces the tradition they bear
- bvi) A capacity accurately to perceive the thinking and objectives of the inquirer and to connect the latter more profoundly with the Christian tradition (Aquino 2017, 168–170).

The above would suggest that the missionary should be an expert or an exemplar, intellectually and spiritually, of the tradition they represent. A monograph could be written exploring the concept of “wisdom” entailed in this last indicator, but it is sufficient at this juncture to say that (bvi) suggests that the missionary must have the capacity to acquire insights into the worldview, objectives, and desires of the inquirer.<sup>20</sup>

### 3.4 Evaluation of the Relevant Knowledge and Propagation of the Gospel

At this stage we have already in our possession knowledge about both (a) the specific cultural context and (b) the Christian tradition. How are we to (c) evaluate these different claims? In his work on the epistemology of theology, Abraham states that this evaluation should respect the contours of the knowledge already in our possession. Paraphrasing Aristotle, he maintains that each area of knowledge has its own levels of precision. Therefore, as it would be foolish to require an orator to produce a scientific justification for his speeches, so it would be unwise to accept a mathematical theory on the basis of rhetoric (Aristotle 2004, 1094b13–28). Thus, from the outset, the missionary must go the extra mile to affirm all within the worldview, as far as possible, which can be preserved.<sup>21</sup> Using the principle of Aristotelian epistemic fit, it should be possible to explore how the contours of this particular cultural context might cohere with that of the Christian tradition from which the missionary hails.<sup>22</sup> Extensive effort should be given to this task so as to ensure that all possible agreement between the particular Christian tradition and the said cultural context is found.<sup>23</sup> There is no question that within this process profound insights

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<sup>20</sup> For further discussion, see Aquino’s work *An Integrative Habit of Mind: John Henry Newman on the Path to Wisdom* (2012).

<sup>21</sup> This echoes *Nostra Aetate*: “From ancient times down to the present, there is found among various peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human history; at times some indeed have come to the recognition of a Supreme Being, or even of a Father. This perception and recognition penetrates their lives with a profound religious sense” (Abbott 1967, 660 para 2).

<sup>22</sup> For a different but similar application of this principle see my essay, “Newman, Wesley and the logic of unity: An inductive approach to ecumenism” (Pratt Morris-Chapman 2023).

<sup>23</sup> Recent work on Christology and evangelism offers some profound reflections on how this essential task might be practically undertaken. For example, utilizing insights contained in the writings of the church fathers and the wider tradition, O’Collins’s *Christology of Religions* offers “Criteria for Discerning the Presence of the Word and the Spirit” in other religious traditions and suggests that “genuine religious experience should

will be obtained from the new culture that will augment the missionary's understanding of his/her Christian tradition.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, new concepts will emerge that may enhance the interpretation of (b) the said Christian tradition.<sup>25</sup> However, the difficulty, at this stage of the process, is the potential or apparent contradictions that may arise between respective knowledge claims contained in (a) and (b). Where there are irrevocable differences, an evaluation (c) will need to be made. Who should make this evaluation? Indeed, what gives the missionary the epistemic authority to interfere with the beliefs and practices of this particular cultural context?<sup>26</sup>

It is a gross understatement to say that centuries of missionary malpractice render the idea that Christians have something to say to a culture that may challenge its worldview unpalatable. Nevertheless, if the intrinsic logic of Christian mission is to be preserved, it is necessary at this juncture to explore how the Christian missionary can acquire epistemic authority in a specific cultural context. At this stage, Zagzebski's reflections on religious authority are helpful. Starting from the premise that the ultimate authority over the self is the self, she argues that authority is valid if an individual believes that following that authority will help them achieve their epistemological and indeed their practical objectives (Zagzebski 2017, 97). Using St. Benedict as an example, she argues that his attempt to convince monks to come under his rule of life centers on a similar argument. Essentially, he asserts that his teachings will be more effective in enabling them to achieve their epistemological and practical objective (of knowing God and living a holy life) than if they follow a different teacher (Zagzebski 2017, 101). Thus Benedict's authority in this case is grounded upon an appeal which attempts to convince his hearers that what they want out of life (what they want to know and how they want to live) can be achieved more successfully if they follow him. Thus, he appeals to their first-order reasons for living but offers them an alternative way of achieving that objective. Essentially, his argument is that "if you monks really want to know God and live holy lives then I can show you how to do this." At this juncture Aquino's reflections on authority are also pertinent. In this particular example, Benedict's spiritual authority is paramount in that he will only convince his hearers if his own life evidences the holiness and intimacy with God which his hearers desire. In sum, his hearers can accept Benedict's epistemic authority if they consider that his own life embodies what they themselves seek (Aquino 2017, 168–170).

Relating these points to our present enquiry, it would seem that if a missionary can successfully map the topography of the worldview they are entering, they can then identify whether there are first-order reasons common to both their own Christian tradition and the new culture. If they can then demonstrate that their (Christian) way of life can more effectively enable members of this particular cultural group to successfully reach that first-order objective (by adopting the missionary's teachings and practices), they might then be considered by their hearers to have an epistemic authority. This of course does not answer the question as to how a missionary could convince those in a cultural context which has completely different first-order reasons for living. While further discussion on this question is beyond the scope of the present article, Zagzebski's reflections on authority are highly pertinent (Zagzebski 2017, 97).<sup>27</sup> Here it is sufficient to say that the missionary can

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induce care, compassion and a generous openness to the needs of others." For further discussion, see O'Collins (2018, 1–2, 68, 100, 129) and McNabb and De Vito (2022, 926).

<sup>24</sup> For further discussion, see Bediako (1991).

<sup>25</sup> For a classic text in this area see Taylor's *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence Amid African Religion* (2001).

<sup>26</sup> Bi-cultural individuals, with a formation in more than one setting, are preferable because they are more likely to have acquired a reflective distance from the diverse cultural components shaping their own formation.

<sup>27</sup> Here it is perhaps sufficient to say that if human beings are made in the image of God, then Augustine's claim that "our hearts are restless until they find the rest in God" would suggest that first-order reasons may not be as different as they may first appear when wrapped in different cultural garb.

potentially acquire epistemic authority within a different cultural context if they demonstrate to their hearers that they have the ability to enable them to reach their first-order objectives. However, in order to explain more clearly how this might operate in practice, it is helpful to offer a contemporary example of Christian mission in a particular context.

## 4. The Wesleyan Mission in Busoga, Uganda

In order to explicate how Zagrebski's reflections on religious authority might be utilized, it is helpful to cite an example of contemporary mission work being undertaken in the Kingdom of Busoga (a region of Uganda).<sup>28</sup> To be more specific, the particular worldview engaged is that of (a) Kisoga culture and the particular Christian tradition in focus here is (b) the Wesleyan Mission in Uganda (WMU). Due to the limited scope of this essay, it will however be necessary to focus on how (a) and (b) explain death and how (c) the Wesleyan Christian tradition offers Kisoga culture a way to reach one of its first-order objectives.

### 4.1 Knowledge about the Origin of Life and Death in Kisoga Culture

There is a proverb Kisoga "*Aulabula aba mwino*" which means "admonition should be followed" (Gonza Kayaga 2009, 35). This principle is found in the legend of Kintu, a story about the origin of the Busoga people and an explanation as to why death came into the world (Ssajabi 2010, 24). Essentially, the legend states that Kintu lived alone until Nambi came down to earth (from above) and fell in love with him. She then returned to her father above (Igulu) and asked for permission to marry Kintu. Kintu was brought above and, after passing many tests set by Igulu, was given permission to marry Nambi. However, before Nambi and Kintu returned below, Igulu warned them to be quick so that death (Walambe) did not follow them. Nambi did not follow this advice. She forgot something and asked Kintu if she could go back and get it. Kintu eventually agreed and when Nambi returned, Walambe saw her and followed her back to earth. As a result, when Kintu and Nambi began to have children, Walambe made them sick and they died. Kintu appealed to heaven above (Igulu), and Igulu sent his son Kayiikuuzi (up-rooter) to earth to stop Walambe (death). However, when Kayiikuuzi came, he was unsuccessful because human beings did not cooperate with him, and he returned to Igulu (heaven) without completing his mission (Ssajabi 2010, 28–43; Roscoe 1915, 195–196).

### 4.2 Knowledge about the Origin of Life and Death in the Wesleyan Christian Tradition

There are points at which the Kintu narrative resonates with the doctrine of the Wesleyan Mission in Uganda (WMU).<sup>29</sup> Essentially, both root the problem of death in the failure of the first human beings to obey a divine instruction. Thus, closely following the teaching of John Wesley's sermons,<sup>30</sup> WMU officially upholds Wesley's teaching on Original Sin:<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> I offer this particular context as an example because it is where I am currently engaged in mission work as a practitioner.

<sup>29</sup> For further discussion, see the Wesleyan Mission in Uganda's (WMU) *Enyanjula Ye'Ntekateeka Ye'Kanisa* (2023, 4).

<sup>30</sup> For a background on contemporary Wesleyan Theology in Africa, see Pratt Morris-Chapman (2021) and (2022).

<sup>31</sup> For further discussion see Wesley's *The doctrine of original sin: according to scripture, reason, and experience* (1757, 9) and WMU (2023, 4).

The doctrines of the evangelical faith which [Weslyanism] has held from the beginning and still holds are based upon the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures. . . . These evangelical doctrines to which the preachers of the Wesleyan Church are pledged are contained in Wesley's Notes on the New Testament and the first four volumes of his sermons (WMU 2023, 4).

Thus, following Wesley, WMU teaches that the rebellion of the first human beings brought death (physical and spiritual) into the world.<sup>32</sup> However, there is also a notable difference between the teaching of WMU and the Kintu narrative. In the latter the appeal for deliverance from Walambe (death) leads to the coming of Kayiikuuzi. Nevertheless, in the narrative recounted above, Kayiikuuzi was unable to save Kintu from (death) Walambe. This is different from the teaching of Wesley and WMU, as is illustrated by the following extract from Wesley's teaching on Original Sin:

Keep to the plain, old faith, "once delivered to the saints," and delivered by the Spirit of God to our hearts. Know your disease! Know your cure! Ye were born in sin: Therefore, "ye must be born again, born of God. By nature ye are wholly corrupted. By grace ye shall be wholly renewed. In Adam ye all died: In the second Adam, in Christ, ye all are made alive" (Wesley 1799, 597).

Here a solution is offered to the problem of death. Following Wesley, WMU's founding document declares its "loyalty to the fundamental truths of the Gospel of Redemption" and swears to "ensure the continued witness of the Church to the realities of the Christian experience of salvation" so that people can be delivered from sin and death through the "second Adam" Jesus Christ (WMU, 2023, 5). In sum, while both (a) and (b) affirm that the cause of death is the disobedience of the first human beings, there is a difference in their understanding of how the problem of death was resolved. This raises the question as to how (b) an WMU missionary might successfully offer an alternative viewpoint which varies with the traditional (a) kisoga worldview. As will be seen below, Zagzebski's reflections on authority are highly pertinent at this juncture.

### **4.3 Evaluation of the Relevant Knowledge and a Propagation of the Gospel**

In the above we indicated that, while Kintu had pleaded with heaven for Walambe (death) to be removed from the earth, Kayiikuuzi was unable to save human beings from Walambe. However, we also noted that the Wesleyan Christian tradition differed considerably on this point and offered a solution to the problem of death ("By repentance and lowliness of heart, the deadly disease . . . is healed" (Wesley 1799, 596)). In the discussion of Zagzebski above, it was argued that if a missionary (b) can demonstrate that their teaching can enable members of a particular cultural group (a) to successfully reach a first-order objective (by adopting the missionary's teachings and practices), they might then be considered by their hearers to have an epistemic authority even if the missionary's claims contradicted those contained within the context of mission (Zagzebski 2017, 97). This is interesting as it would appear that, like many other cultures, a central value in Kisoga

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<sup>32</sup> For example, citing the Bible extensively, Wesley affirms that "the Scripture avers, that 'by one man's disobedience all men were constituted sinners'; that 'in Adam all died,' spiritually died, lost the life and the image of God . . . that consequently we, as well as other men, were by nature 'dead in trespasses and sins, without hope, without God in the world'" (Wesley 1799, 587; WMU 2023, 4).

culture is the sanctity of life. According to Gonza, for the Basoga, “life itself is sharing in the life, power and force of the transcendent God.” Life is thus deemed sacred (Gonza Kayaga 2019, 38). From this it might be inferred that, if the (b) missionary can convince his hearers (a) that her/his teachings can enable them to have life rather than death, then he/she may obtain an epistemic authority in that the message delivered appeals to the first-order reasons of the Basoga people. In sum, the missionary (b) would potentially attain the epistemic authority to offer an alternative vision to that contained within the cultural context (a). The missionary’s authority in this case is grounded upon an appeal which attempts to convince his hearers that what they most value and desire can be achieved more successfully if they follow Wesleyan teaching. Thus, he appeals to their first-order reasons for living but offers them an alternative way of achieving that objective.

## 5. Conclusion

The present essay has explored an alternative theoretical framework for understanding the logic of mission. Having illustrated the deficiency within the popular “paradigm-shift” approach adopted by figures like David Bosch, it proposes a particularist approach to the epistemology of missiology which allows the missionary to affirm both (a) the knowledge arising from a specific cultural context and (b) the knowledge contained within their Christian tradition. Furthermore, it enables the missionary retrospectively to (c) evaluate these knowledge claims in order to effectively communicate the gospel within that particular cultural context. Having tentatively outlined how this might function, it is clear that much more reflection needs to be given to this topic; perhaps there is a need for a new sub-discipline, the epistemology of missiology. Moreover, it will also be helpful, given the subject matter, for this theory to be tested in relation to specific examples—for a wide variety of cultural contexts and Christian traditions to be explored in relation to this approach. Here it is sufficient to say that enquiries of this nature could potentially be very fruitful for both missiology and indeed epistemology.

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