

Critical Reflection on the Philosophical Understanding of Human Nature in Christian Religious Educational Ministry



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ABSTRACT

This study aims to offer a more profound comprehension of the origins, nature, and makeup, as well as the embodiment of humankind in relation to ontology, epistemology, and the axiom that encompasses us as humans within a philosophical and educational context. In this context, the paper explored the overall root, nature, and make-up, and the overall embodiment of humans within a philosophical framework and discussed how it is embodied in the teaching of the theology of knowledge. The paper also discussed the importance of a relational reflective style of knowing that is shaped by the faith stories of the Christians of old and the vision that those stories lead to in Christian religious education. The study concluded that the quest for understanding is not merely an academic exercise but a profound spiritual exploration. The philosophical underpinnings of human nature, as articulated by thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine and Calvin, underscore a dynamic interplay between rationality and divine revelation. There is a need for all to embrace the challenge of educating for virtuous action, grounded in a deep and abiding knowledge of oneself, one's world, and the God who invites humanity into an ever-deepening relationship of love and understanding.

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INTRODUCTION

"Many times humankind lives and dies between two eternities," stated poet William Butler Yeats.¹ Through birth, human beings have left eternity behind, and through death have returned, living "in time" between the two eternities. Nevertheless, since humankind first started to consider its nature, philosophers have struggled with how to identify and discuss this period.² By the very nature of humankind, or the philosophers would say, ontologically, the past, with its stories, discoveries, customs, myths, symbols, rituals, artifacts, systems, institutions, skills, and so forth, is precisely why humankind can have the present and out of it shape the future.

The early ideas regarding the nature of education are conveyed in the writings of the ancient Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. They both grounded their educational theory on the study of philosophy,

¹ Jon Stallworthy and William Butler Yeats, "WB Yeats's 'Under Ben Bulbin'," *The Review of English Studies* 17, no. 65 (1966): 30–53.

² L.W. Perna, "Studying College Choice: A Proposed Conceptual Model," in *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, ed. J. C. Smart, vol. 20 (.Dor-drecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer, 2006).

a word whose original meaning is “the love of wisdom.” This love is actualized through a life of study, which is not chiefly concerned with the pursuit of new knowledge but with a more detailed explanation of the interconnectedness of beliefs. Plato and Aristotle attempted to craft descriptions of what it is to be human, and through these classical understandings, educational ideologies were developed. Plato and Aristotle’s belief in human rationality necessitated the development of educational principles. If humanity is fundamentally rational, the question is, how do human beings best actualize rational abilities? According to Aristotle, an educated person is grounded in the essential concepts of reality so that he or she can act ethically. To act ethically, human beings must have the proper desires and feelings or responses to reality. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle states that human beings are political animals, which means humans are social beings by nature.³ Proper existence within society requires proper treatment of others; humanity must act upon knowledge of what is good. A developed understanding of human nature allows for understanding what true human flourishing looks like. Therefore, education is the process by which people learn how to correctly assess various circumstances and behave in a way that is advantageous to the community. This might be interpreted as receiving instruction for moral behaviour.

Like Plato and Aristotle, great Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Calvin hold onto the importance of being properly educated. They also believe that education enables human beings to develop a proper understanding of human nature and other aspects of reality. One important difference between Christians and thinkers like Plato and Aristotle is related to revelation. Rationality plays an important role in the Christian thinker’s educational theories, but rationality itself does not give a complete understanding of reality. Human beings need divine revelation. Plato and Aristotle however disagree. This disagreement plays a seminal role in how humanity believes and accesses reality. If human beings believe that reality is only found in the physical senses, it limits access to information that may exist outside the empirical realm. The beliefs about humanity's access to reality structures, then means how human beings gained knowledge about the world and taught the community to pursue that knowledge.

St. Augustine, who was a man of amazing natural intellect, realized that he was unable to truly understand the nature of the reality around him without insight given to him by God.⁴ In Augustine’s autobiographical work ‘*Confessions*,’ he discusses how he didn't fully comprehend God until the Holy Spirit and Scripture intervened.⁵ For Augustine, human beings must understand humanity in relationship with God to fully actualize human potential and capabilities. He famously writes, "Until human beings find their rest in God, human hearts are restless."⁶ To be whole, human beings must view life in the context of God's redeeming act and the goals of his kingdom for all of humankind.

The knowledge of God and the knowledge of humanity make up nearly all of the wisdom human beings possess, or real and sound wisdom, according to John Calvin in his seminal work "Institutes of the Christian Religion."⁷ Calvin realized that human rational capacities are a foundational part of how human beings know the world around them, but to truly understand who human beings are, humanity must be illuminated by God’s revelation, which comes via the power of the Holy Spirit and his message.⁸ Humanity’s inability to completely discern the nature of reality is to be expected because of sin, but God, through his mercy, intervenes by his revelatory gift.⁹ The combination of human rational capacities and the grace given to human beings through the revelation of God enables human beings to be educated. History has shown that it has been easy to give up logic in favour of revelation or rationality in favour of revelation, but doing so results in an incapacity to understand reality.

The symbiotic relationship between rationality and revelation enables human beings to craft the most complete view of reality. The discourse of this paper discusses the overall root, nature and makeup,

³ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (New York: Dover Publication Inc. , 1998).

⁴ St. Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, Translated by Edward Bouverie Pusey (Oak Harbour: Logos Research System, 1999).

⁵ St. Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*.

⁶ St. Augustine, *Confessions, Trans. Henry Chadwick* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Translated by Ford Lewis Battles*, ed. John T. McNeil, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

⁸ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Translated by Ford Lewis Battles*.

⁹ It is not the purpose of this thesis to argue for the place of Scripture as a centerpiece of educational theory within the Christian view of the discipline of education. It is granted as a fundamental avenue by which educators gain insight on human nature.

as well as the embodiment of humankind in relation to ontology, epistemology and the axiom that encompasses humans within the philosophical and educational context.

THE CONCEPT OF 'KNOWING' IN CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The area of philosophy known as epistemology studies the character, origins, and dependability of knowledge. How does knowledge come about? How are human beings made aware? How can human beings verify the veracity of what humanity knows? These questions occupy epistemology. Responses offered to them at the beginning of Western philosophy established some patterns that have continued ever since.

In the ancient world, people thought the gods alone were the owners and sources of knowledge, and human beings could know only what the deities shared with them. Recognition of human agency in knowing came in circa with the pre-Socratic philosophers. They insisted people are agents of their knowledge and paved the way for metaphysics - the rational inquiry into nature and the meaning of all that exists. However, these first philosophers soon had to face the prior questions of the nature, sources, and reliability of knowledge itself.

Probably the Sophists raised epistemology as a pressing issue. These were wandering teachers who came to Athens from foreign cities to literally sell their knowledge. Because their livelihood depended on their success, the Sophists often attached themselves to ambitious young politicians who needed training in rhetoric to be used as persuasion for whatever idea seemed politically expedient. Their facility with words enabled the Sophists to convincingly defend paradoxical positions. This skill, however, raised the threat of relativism and the question, is any human knowledge true or reliable? The Skeptics offered one response. As their name often denotes, they denied the very possibility of reliable knowledge and placed the whole philosophical enterprise in crisis.¹⁰ Skepticism was itself rejected with a vengeance, most eminently by Plato and Aristotle, but those who argued for the reliability of knowledge were soon divided by what they regarded as its source, one emphasizing the role and reliability of reason, the other, the role of sense experience. Thus, two general schools of epistemology emerged; though there are many variations within each one, they can still be called rationalism and empiricism.

According to rationalism, the mind is the source and shape of trustworthy information. By reasoned intuition, some first principles can be recognized. By rational deduction and logical analysis from those foundational propositions, other ideas follow in a descending hierarchy of true ideas. Thought begins from sense experience, and in the battle cry of empiricists, "Nothing is ever in the mind that was not first in the senses."¹¹ For the rationalists then, true ideas and where human beings can know them (and there are both dogmatists and skeptics among them); come from the use of reason alone. For empiricists, true ideas, where humanity can know them (and there are relativists and positivists among them), begin always with sense experience.

Preoccupation with rationality encourages a contradiction between "being" and knowing, theory and application, intention and thought, with a one-way relationship from the former as a source to the latter as a point of application. Even the pragmatists, the empiricists too, and certainly the rationalists, failed to maintain a dialectical unity between life and thought; everyday historical activity was taken seriously as both source and realization.

Rationality places certain ideas at the top of a hierarchy of knowledge within a patriarchal culture encouraged by what Sandra Harding calls an "androcentric ideology." This ideology insisted on a dichotomy between the "rational mind" and "pre-rational body and irrational emotions and values." and "linked" "men and masculinity to the former and women and femininity to the latter."¹² It excluded women from the processes, structures, and social power of "real" knowing. Evelyn Fox-Keller summarizes Western epistemology as marked by a triumph of mind, ideas, body and nature, men over women.¹³ This

¹⁰ The origin of Skepticism is usually traced to the philosophers of the eleatic school who questioned the reality of the sensory world and raised doubts about our human ability to know from experience. A more thorough form of Skepticism, questioning the ability of both reason and experience to engender reliable knowledge, emerged with Pyrrho of Elis and Timon of Phlius.

¹¹ Aquinas popularized this phrase but claimed to have learned from Aristotle. Aquinas, *Truth*, 2, 3, Diff. 19; vol. 1, 69.

¹² Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism*. (New York: Cornell University Press, 1986) 136.

¹³ Evelyn Fox-Keller, *Essays on Language, Gender and Science*. (New York: Chapman and Hall, 1992), chaps, 3, 4.

“triumph” also encouraged the myth of “objective” and “value free” ideas that are “undistorted” by the physical, emotional, or aesthetic of life or by relational considerations.

From Socrates, Plato became convinced that rigid thought might reveal the human soul's or mind's unwavering will to strive for moral excellence; that the foundation of good government is not democracy, because it relies on the opinions of common people who are leading an “unexamined life,” but rather rule by philosopher kings, who, because of their reliable knowledge, will do justice by the people. Plato pointed to the unquestionable truths of mathematics as instances of rational certainty and set out to establish that humanity can have certain knowledge, to describe what it is and how human beings come to it, and to distinguish it from mere opinion.

Human beings are able to form ideas about the world of "becoming" through human bodies and sense experiences, but human beings are unable to obtain trustworthy information about the world of substantial and actual "being."

For Plato, it is by reason, unaided by sense experience, that human beings come to certain knowledge of the most real world of “being” the world of forms. These are eternally true and unchanging ideas that lie outside the domain of temporal, material nature. Reality is only a faint shadow of the real world of forms; humanity cannot know them from experience but by reason alone. For Plato, poetry, painting, sculpture, drama, and religious ritual are totally unreliable ways of knowing. Individuals who seek knowledge must transcend the physical realm of their senses and emotions and enter the mentally distinct realm of self-awareness and self-reflection.¹⁴

Plato believed that the human soul has eros for this most real, universal, and unchanging world of forms, to withdraw from bodily influences and think for itself about clear and certain ideas. Ideas are already in the mind as sight is already in the eye, and human beings simply recollect them by anamnesis, by reminiscence.¹⁵ It is Plato’s conviction that there is, beyond sense perception, a reliable source and measure of truth that is not of human construction alone, people who believe in God can claim no less.¹⁶ Christians believe that God reveals God’s self in creation, life, and the events of history and that “the truth” did not remain otherworldly but became flesh in a person. This truth is not to be simply known about in human heads or sought in another world but ostracized now by living like Jesus. Excluding the body from human knowledge encourages Christians to ignore the incarnational aspect of their faith, the truth incarnate in Jesus, and to be incarnated in their own time and place. By dismissing historical “being” as a way of knowing, Plato failed to see the role of knowing in forming people’s wills in the habit of virtue. For Plato, knowledge is best joined with power and placed in the hands of an elite and exclusive group of men who are to rule the rest.

Practical Philosophical ways of ‘Knowing’ in Christian Religious Education

According to Aristotle, the free individual possesses three unique approaches to living a wise life—or, to put it another way, there are three human endeavours that can lead to insight. These he designated as *poiesis*, *praxis*, and *theoria*.¹⁷ They stand for three different forms of living: the practical life, the creative life, and the theoretical life.¹⁸ Pondering and introspection are hallmarks of the speculative life. A moral existence inside a political framework is what is meant to be practical. A creative endeavour or the creation of artifacts constitutes a productive life. An involved, meditative, and reflective process seeking the truth is a *theoria* mode of knowing. Being reflectively involved in a social setting is a *praxis* method of knowing. Although the concept of *poiesis* originated from and found expression in "making," the main distinction between the two is in their ultimate goals. The creation of artifacts is the goal of productive knowledge, human social behaviour is ordered by practical knowledge, and theoretical knowledge is an end in itself.¹⁹

¹⁴ Plato, *The Republic*. In *Great Dialogues of Plato Book 7*, ed. Translated by W. H. D. Rouse. (New York: The New American Library, 1956).

¹⁵ Plato, *The Republic*. In *Great Dialogues of Plato Book 7*. 316-17.

¹⁶ Plato, *Plato’s Cosmology, The Timaeus of Plato*. Translated with Running Commentary (London: Compton Printing Ltd., 1966).

¹⁷ M Aristotle, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941).

¹⁸ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*.

¹⁹ Nicholas Lobkowitz, *Theory and Practice: History of Concept from Aristotle to Marx* (U S A: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967).

For Aristotle, there are three “conditions” or “states of mind”, that result in a *theoria* manner of knowing; on the other hand, the practice of *theoria* fosters the development of these habits.²⁰ The first two are “*episteme*,” the faculty by which human beings can reason syllogistically to know principles that are necessary and eternal,²¹ and “*nous*” which is the state of mind that apprehends first principles.²² However, these two are subsumed in “the most finished form of knowledge,”²³ the state of mind he calls *Sophia*. *Sophia* includes both “*nous*” and “*episteme*” but goes beyond them in that, in Aristotle’s words, “wisdom “*Sophia*” is scientific “*episteme*” and intuitive knowledge “*nous*” of what is by nature most precious.”²⁴

Aristotle uses the term *praxis* with a number of different but closely related meanings. In its broadest possible meaning, *praxis* refers to almost any kind of intentional and deliberate outward activity that a free person is likely to perform. In a more restricted sense, it describes “rational and purposeful human conduct.”²⁵ Also, in its strictest definition, *praxis* refers to moral behaviour inside political arenas. Therefore, *praxis* invariably involves “twin moments”—activity (that is, engagement and reflection) that are interwoven, not distinct from one another; rather, *praxis* is both action carried out thoughtfully and reflection on the action carried out.

He explains: “Now the origin of action (*praxis*) is choice, and the origin of choice is appetition and purposive reasoning.”²⁶ He continues, saying, “Three things—sensation, intellect, and appetition—control action (*praxis*) and (the attainment of) truth in the soul.”²⁷ Thus *praxis* is not a dispassionately chosen action (in fact *apatheia*, lack of passion, always hinders *praxis*), but neither is it an unreasonable following of whim or appetite. The choice involved in *praxis* is, in Aristotle’s words, “either appetitive intellect or intellectual appetition; and man is a principle of this kind.”²⁸ From this, one can conclude that, for Aristotle, *Praxis* is the action of the mind, heart, and lifestyle together.

He argued, however, that intentional education must be grounded in a way of knowing. He insisted constantly that education is a part of politics - the epitome of the life of *praxis*- and as such is a practical rather than a theoretical science.²⁹ To Aristotle, a specific moral character that would form a good citizen and advance the welfare of others is the ultimate goal of education, not some abstract knowledge.

Augustine’s Theological View on ‘Knowing’ in Ministry

The theological method used by Augustine in “*City of God and in his Confessions*” is a spiritual reflection on his relationship with God and on the indicators of the times based on what the Bible and the Church have taught. His theological purpose is a quest for practical spiritual wisdom, and his method is based on an experiential/relational way of knowing.³⁰ Like Aristotle, Augustine also speaks of “three lives.” He writes:

“It adopts one of the three lifestyle approaches: contemplative, active, or contemplative-active. Any one of these three can be followed by someone who lives a life of faith and attains paradise. He or she must love the truth and fulfill charitable obligations; that is what makes them non-different. No human being can be so devoted to reflection that he neglects the needs of his neighbour or be so preoccupied with action that he neglects to reflect on God.”³¹

He makes it plain that the Christian life must be a life of *praxis*, or what he terms contemplative-active, even if he wishes to give all three ways of living equal weight. Much ahead of his time were Augustine's instructional insights.³² Contrary to his theological approach, he suggested a didactic

²⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 93.

²¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 207.

²² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 211.

²³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 211.

²⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 212.

²⁵ Lobkowitz, *Theory and Practice*, 11.

²⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 205.

²⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 205.

²⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 206.

²⁹ John Burnet, *Aristotle on Education, Extracts from Ethics and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967).1.

³⁰ Gustavo Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973). 6.

³¹ St. Augustine, *City of God, Translated by Gerald G. Walsh et Al*, ed. Vernon J. Bourke (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1985).

³² St. Augustine, “*The First Catechetical Instruction*” Translated by Joseph P. Christopher in *Ancient Christian Writers*, vol. 2 (Madison: Newman Press, 1962).

narrational method to teach people the narrative of redemption, seemingly oblivious to people's lived experiences as a dimension of knowledge. "He to whom you speak by hearing may believe, and by believing may hope, and by hoping may love," he counsels Deacon Deogratias, encouraging him to impart love in his teachings.³³ The epistemic premise is clear in that instance: receiving instruction orally first results in belief, which is followed by Christian behaviour.

Scholarly Views on 'Knowing' in Christian Religious Education

John Locke argues that all knowing begins not in the mind, but in sensation. The mind is a "*tabula rasa*" whose ideas come from sense experience.³⁴ Immanuel Kant makes an effort to mediate the disagreement between the British empiricists (Locke, Berkeley, and Hume) and the continental rationalists (Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibnitz). He maintains that every knowledge comes from an intellectual act based on what the mind is exposed to from without.³⁵

Hegel's conception of history as a dynamic, dialectically growing process led him to regard praxis as historical, embracing the past and moving beyond it to sculpt the future in the direction of the advancement of human freedom. Theory and practice are dialectically connected in that continuing historical unfolding, as opposed to being dichotomized from one another as Aristotle had left them.³⁶

For Marx, human beings and history are the products of "dialectical materialism," the dialectical interaction between human beings and the concrete objects of reality. In consequence, humanity is what human beings make out of life. The human emancipation he hoped for is to be entirely and exclusively the product of human efforts, but Christians cannot settle for such a limited notion of praxis. In theological language, this is an extreme form of Pelagianism, the view that salvation comes from human efforts alone. The Christian's historical praxis is not only a material praxis, nor is it entirely human "doing." In addition to a living connection with God, as it is experienced and considered in a Christian community and throughout the human race, human knowledge is derived from an active and reflective interaction with the world that God has created. Marx, of course, would dismiss such a theological criticism as based on false consciousness. He saw all such religious "groaning" as no more than an expression of the pain caused by the alienation of people from the products of their labor in an unjust society.³⁷

Anthony Quinton also points out that, "the causes of human misery and frustration include, but go far beyond, the existing system of property-relations."³⁸ By limiting reflection to production feedback, the importance of self-initiated critical reflection as a moving force in historical praxis is largely obliterated.³⁹ The most important modern proponent of a praxis approach to education is Freire. He makes this argument because he thinks it can further human liberation. Freire's philosophy of education is based on three fundamental philosophical tenets. First, the fundamental human endeavour is humanization. Second, reality is something that humans can alter. Third, learning is never impartial. Politics are usually affected by it. People may be controlled by being forced to adhere to the norms of the current society, or they may be freed to confront their reality in a critical and imaginative way with the goal of changing it.

The Natural Way of Knowing in Christian Religious Education Ministry

To say human beings grasp reality implies something about knowledge. Epistemology (the study of knowledge) is a fundamental tool in proper education. How human beings define knowledge, how human beings assess others' knowledge and how human beings pursue knowledge, is at the core of all that humanity does. Therefore, it is important to separate what human beings merely think knowledge is from what truly constitutes knowledge. Technical knowledge, also known as know-how, propositional knowledge, or factual information, and knowledge by familiarity, or direct awareness of something, are the first three categories of knowledge.⁴⁰

³³ St. Augustine, "*The First Catechetical Instruction*" Translated by Joseph P. Christopher in *Ancient Christian Writers* .

³⁴ John Locke, *Two Treatises on Government* (New York: Dutton, Everyman's Library, 1970).

³⁵ Immanuel Kant, "*What is Enlightenment*" In *On History*. Edited by Lewis Beck. (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1977) 45.

³⁶ G. W. F. Hegel *Reason in History; A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, ed. Translated by Robert S. Hartman (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1953).

³⁷ Karl Marx, *Interlectual Origin of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan Publishers, 1996), 384.

³⁸ Anthony Quinton, "Critical Theory. On the Frankfurt School," *Encounter* 43, no. 4 (1974): 43–53.

³⁹ Habermas Jürgen, *Theory and Practice* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1973).

⁴⁰ Paulo Freire, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," in *Toward a Sociology of Education* (Routledge, 2020), 374–86.

Contemporary society sees scientific naturalism as the salvation of humanity. Naturalism maintains that knowledge is exclusively limited to the realm of sense perceptions. Wilson is a staunch advocate of scientific naturalism. He opines that, despite its flaws, science is the sword in the stone that mankind has eventually managed to pry out.⁴¹ Wilson believes that prior to the modern leaps in science, objective truth was an elusive goal for any academic discipline.⁴² Today, science is the sole means to objective truth. Knowledge is attained through the scientific method. Naturalism adheres to scientism as their theory. There are two types of scientism: strong and weak. The belief that knowledge can only be acquired via scientific research is known as strong scientism. A hypothesis is not an object of knowledge if it cannot be known empirically, as is the case with Christianity. Weak scientism asserts that while science is the preeminent means of pursuing knowledge, other disciplines can have justified views about what is knowledge. A naturalist believes minimally that his/her view of knowledge is vastly superior to all accounts, or maximally. That it is the only means by which to know.

Daniel Dennett, a staunch advocate of evolutionary biology and scientism, argues that the only way to account for a religious inclination is through empirical investigation because that is how facts are known.⁴³ Dennett, quoted in an article in the *New Statesman*, claims that if one pulls out the blinds and plays the faith card when things get rough, religion may be "the nuclear weapon of rational discussion." It becomes a farce.⁴⁴ "Science is the only game in town when it comes to facts and explanation of facts." He makes the observation that while religion has certain beneficial effects, the Mafia also does. If the Mafia controls the area, it maintains neighborhoods extremely safe and lowers the rate of minor crimes. That does not render it advantageous.⁴⁵ For Dennett, religion cannot withstand his epistemic criteria of being testable in the sense-perceptible world.

The Educational Means of Knowing in Christian Ministry

Declaring that one knows something means that there is strong enough evidence to support one's beliefs. True belief is justified by knowledge. To understand how belief, justification, and truth combine to generate an integrated concept of knowledge, it is important to understand the roles that each of these categories—belief, truth, and justification—plays in the process of defining knowing.

Humankind can come to some conscious knowledge of itself and of the world. But what is the nature and scope of human knowing? What is its basis? Given the ability human beings have for self-deception, can one depend on his or her knowing process? These are the basic questions investigated by epistemology. Over the history of philosophy, many different ways of knowing oneself and the world have been proposed, each with its own criteria for judging the reliability of what is known. Thus, if educators are consciously to select a way of knowing upon which to base their teaching, a choice must be made among different epistemological positions. Clearly, educators must give primary consideration to adopting a way of knowing that is capable of promoting the purpose for which their particular educational endeavor is intended. Thus, to answer the epistemological question for Christian religious education, one must be mindful first of the nature, goals, and the environment in which it operates.

Live Christian faith is a way of knowing oneself, God, and the world in Christ; a relationship with God, other people, and the world in Christ; and a way of actively engaging in the world with others in response to the value of the Kingdom of God as preached and made possible by Christ. Educating for such a lived faith should also have the consequence of promoting human freedom spiritually, psychologically, and socially. It needs to arise from a Christian faith community and return to that community to increase its faithfulness, rather than simply maintaining what is already there. Whatever way of knowing one adopts, it should be capable of promoting an educational activity of such nature and purpose. The Bible offers nothing like an explicit epistemology in the sense of an articulated theory of knowledge. Yet, it speaks constantly about "knowing the Lord" and about how such knowing is promoted. Thus, one can

⁴¹ Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).

⁴² Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* .

⁴³ Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking Adult, 2006).

⁴⁴ Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. 29.

⁴⁵ Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, 29.

detect the way of knowing and its proposes by investigating what it means to know the Lord and how it describes that knowing process.⁴⁶

The Old Testament Biblical way of Knowing in Christian Ministry

Yada is the verb for "know" in Hebrew. The Greek word *ginoskein* is used for *yada* in the Septuagint. However, the Greek word *ginoskein* clearly suggests objectivity and is primarily used to denote "intellectual looking at" as an object of inquiry. It is inaccurate to translate *ginoskein* as "yada" if this is how the Septuagint understands it. The Hebrews understand *yada* more as coming from the heart than the head, and knowledge comes from actively and purposefully participating in actual experience rather than passively looking at it. It is noteworthy that the Hebrew language lacked any term that precisely matched the true meaning of language, intelligence, or thinking. "Drawing a connection between *ginoskein* and *yada*, Rudolf Bultmann notes that "the Old Testament usage is much broader than the Greek, and the element of objective verification is less prominent than of detecting or feeling or learning by experience."

In order to gain knowledge of the Lord, one must actively acknowledge the Lord, which calls for submission to God's will. In actuality, unless a person carries out God's will in reaction to an encounter with God, God is neither acknowledged nor understood.⁴⁷ Being possessed by God demands the response of obedience (Ps. 119:79). Since this is what it means to "know the Lord," the foolish or stupid person in the Bible is not one who lacks intellectual understanding, but rather one who disobeys God's commands. Thus, ignorance is equivalent to guilt in the biblical sense. Thus, knowledge has an element of acknowledgment, according to Bultmann. However, ignorance also entails guilt and error since it has an emotional component, or more accurately, a movement of the will. To confess or recognize Him, to show Him respect, and to submit to His will is to know Him or His name.

Understanding God in the Hebrew meaning results from lived experience; it necessitates that the individual be captivated by Yahweh, recognize God's sovereignty with all of their heart, and live in response by carrying out God's will.

The New Testament Biblical way of Knowing in Christian Ministry

Given that much of the New Testament was composed for Gentile readers and was influenced by Hellenistic civilization, it is not surprising that the intellectual quality of knowing does appear.⁴⁸ But to "Know God" still has the same fundamental meaning in the New Testament as in the Hebrew Scriptures. This is evident from the fact that *ginoskein* continues to be used for lovemaking as well as for knowing. Bultmann reviews the meaning of knowing the Lord in the Synoptic and argues that its primary meaning is still that of the Old Testament and has a major influence on the Christian understanding of knowing.

True knowledge of God and Christ, according to Paul, is a dynamic, experiential connection that must find its expression in agape—love of neighbor (1 Cor. 8:1 ff). In 1 Cor. 13, *gnosis* (knowledge) is placed under agape, because without agape it is worthless. Knowledge is to be grounded in love and lead to the right action (Phil. 1:9 ff). To "grow in the knowledge of God," one must "lead a life worthy of the Lord and pleasing to him in every way, multiplying good works of every sort ... " (Col. 1:10). Thus for Paul "knowing God" is grounded in a loving relationship and leads to loving service for others. McKenzie finds that John "explicitates what is implicit elsewhere ..."⁴⁹ For John to "know the Lord" is to obey, and to believe.

It is challenging to determine whether love is the fruit of knowledge or knowledge is the fruit of love in John since knowledge and love develop together.⁵⁰ They are grounded in and mutually enriched by each other and do not exist apart, the only way to truly know God is through a loving relationship.

It is because of the love between himself and the Father, that Jesus declares, "The Father knows me and I know the Father." (John 10:15). The same knowledge exists between Jesus and his disciples (John 10:14,27). But this loving/knowing, and the awareness of it, is to find expression in agape—loving

⁴⁶ Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Volume I*, vol. 1 (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1964).

⁴⁷ John McKenzie summarizes this well when he writes, "The knowledge of Yahweh may be summed up in experience and response" (*Dictionary of the Bible, "Know, Knowledge,"* 486).

⁴⁸ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1:701.

⁴⁹ McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 487.

⁵⁰ McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 487.

service of one's neighbor. According to 1 John 4:21, "Anyone who loves God must also love his/her brother." (John 4:11; John 15:12, 13:34). Thus one must be in a loving connection with God, recognize that love, and return that love by loving his/her neighbour in order to know God.

Following God's instructions is necessary if anyone wants to know God and wants to be a part of Jesus. "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free, if you truly are my disciples if you live according to my teaching" (John 8:31b-32).

According to the Bible, knowing God is a dynamic, relational, experiencing activity that involves the entire person and finds expression in a living act of loving obedience to God's will. God is unknown without love in action. Any other knowledge, according to the biblical perspective, is folly without such action.

There is, however, another dimension to biblical knowledge that is most relevant to one's search for a way of knowing in Christian religious education. While the biblical source of knowing is what contemporary educators might call experiential, that knowing is also to be informed by the people's understanding of their past history and of the promises God made to them. Educators must not conclude that the biblical process of knowing the Lord is totally a "discovery method" within present experience as if what had been known by the people before was of no consequence. On the contrary, both the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament make it abundantly clear that there must be a resolute commitment to remembering and retelling the historical accounts of God's involvement with the people and to understanding all current occurrences in the context of God's Kingdom.

According to the biblical interpretation, individuals encounter the Lord while living in the middle of historical events, by considering what God has been up to there, by developing a connection with God and God's people, and by their actual reaction to that relationship. However, their knowledge is influenced by their aspirations for God's promise for their future and is informed by and understood through the Story that has emerged from the prior "knowing" of God's people. According to the Bible, Christian religious education should be based on a relational, introspective method of knowing that is influenced by the faith stories of the Christians of old as well as the vision that those stories lead towards.

The way of knowing that underlies the educational theories proposed by Gabriel Moran and James Michael Lee is also relational/experiential/reflective. Moran's notion of revelation resonates quite clearly using a hands-on method for teaching religion. Moran makes the claim that "the personal, relational, social, and practical experience of people today" serves as the foundation for revelation. Therefore it would appear that religious education must use an experiential approach."⁵¹ Then an experiential approach to religious education would seem inevitable. James Michael Lee draws upon the social sciences to devise a theory of "religious instruction." A basic contention in his theory is that learning is in, and from experience. Accepting that "experience is revelational,"⁵² He argues that the religion class should be made into a Christian living laboratory and workshop where students learn Christian living precisely by practicing Christian living in the context of a real-world learning environment."⁵³ Consequently, "The task of religious instruction is to provide the experience in which Christian learning can take place and in which the individual can acquire behaviors which one may legitimately call 'Christian.'" ⁵⁴

The socialization approach in the Protestant tradition of religious education is already based on a relational, experienced, and reflective method of knowing. Religious formation and education, according to Coe, Elliott, Nelson, and Westerhoff, come from people's interactions and lived experiences in Christian communities. Many other prominent Protestant scholars also support an experienced approach to learning in religious education.

For Miller the clue to Christian education is in theology,⁵⁵ but a theology that arises from reflection on human experience. Grounding Christian educational activity in human relationships, he thus sees it as a social process.

⁵¹ Gabriel Moran, *The Present Revelation* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972).

⁵² Michael J. Lee, *The Shape of Religious Instruction* (Dayton, Ohio: Pflaum, 1971).

⁵³ Lee, *The Shape of Religious Instruction*, 19.

⁵⁴ Lee, *The Shape of Religious Instruction*, 74.

⁵⁵ Randolph Crump Miller, "Education for Christian Living," 1956, <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:262785228>.

CONCLUSION

Concluding the journey through the deep and reflective examination of human nature within the realm of Christian religious educational ministry, it becomes evident that the quest for understanding is not merely an academic exercise but a profound spiritual exploration. The philosophical underpinnings of human nature, as articulated by thinkers from Plato and Aristotle to Augustine and Calvin, underscore a dynamic interplay between rationality and divine revelation. This intricate dance between understanding the world through reason and embracing the mysteries of faith through the core of Christian education is a revelation.

The exploration of epistemology reveals that knowing is not a straightforward path but a complex process influenced by historical, cultural, and spiritual forces. The Sophists, Skeptics, Rationalists, and Empiricists each contributed to the rich tapestry of understanding how one comes to know what one believes to be true. Yet, it is in the Christian tradition that one finds a unique synthesis of reason and revelation, a reminder that the quest for knowledge and understanding is intimately connected to one's relationship with the Divine. The practical philosophical ways of knowing, from Aristotle's *theoria*, *praxis*, and *poiesis* to the experiential and relational dimensions highlighted by Augustine, Locke, Kant, and others, invite all and sundry to engage with the world and with each other in deeply meaningful ways. These modes of engagement challenge everyone not to only think deeply but to live authentically in accordance with the ethical and moral principles that shape one's understanding of human flourishing. The natural and educational ways of knowing, remind humanity that the pursuit of knowledge is both a personal and communal endeavor. The biblical perspective, with its emphasis on relational and experiential knowledge, calls everyone to a lived faith that transcends mere intellectual assent. It invites humanity into a dynamic relationship with God, where knowing and loving are intertwined in the fabric of human life. This exploration has traversed the philosophical landscape, engaged with theological insights, and reflected on the practical implications of one's understanding of human nature in the context of Christian religious educational ministry. As humanity moves forward, may all readers carry the wisdom gleaned from this journey, ever mindful of the rich tradition that informs human understanding and shapes humanity's approach to education. There is a need for all to embrace the challenge of educating for virtuous action, grounded in a deep and abiding knowledge of oneself, one's world, and the God who invites humanity into an ever-deepening relationship of love and understanding.

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