2025 TheoLogica
An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology
VARIA
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14428/thl.v9i1.83593

Epistemic Egoism and Protestant Uses of Tradition

E. V. R. KOJONEN
University of Helsinki, Faculty of Theology
rope.kojonen@helsinki.fi

Abstract: Although ecumenical dialogue has highlighted many commonalities between Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox, many issues still remain contentious. One often recurring suspicion is that the Protestant idea of sola scriptura inevitably leads to an individualistic religiosity, neglecting the importance of the divinely guided Christian tradition and Christian church teaching for understanding the Bible. In this article, I relate this critique to the idea of "epistemic egoism", as defined by Linda Zagzebski, and develop an alternative Protestant social epistemology based on tradition as the "democracy of the dead", error-corrected by sola scriptura. I test this Protestant theological epistemology against two recent criticisms: (1) the "Conciliar Argument Against Protestantism" (CAAP), arguing that Protestantism fails to provide consistent criteria for valuing conciliar authority as a guide to biblical interpretation, and (2) the "Scriptural Argument Against Dogmatic Protestantism", arguing that sola scriptura, when understood in light of theological disagreement, ultimately becomes self-refuting in the absence of properly guiding theological authority. I argue, however, that sola scriptura is compatible with assigning an important epistemic role to both tradition and community, and that Protestant principles of theological reasoning can be defended further using recent theories in social epistemology.

Keywords: Sola Scriptura, Protestantism, Social Epistemology, Testimony, Epistemic Egoism

1. Introduction

1.1. Epistemic Egoism vs. The Democracy of the Dead

In her work on the nature of epistemic authority, Linda Zagzebski (2012) has used the term "epistemic egoism" to refer to the attitude of trusting only in oneself,

rather than relying on the testimony of others. Although classical Protestantism encourages trusting in the testimony of the Bible, Zagzebski (2012, 1) nevertheless believes that "the Protestant Reformation, the political turmoil of the early modern period, and the rise of modern science all contributed to shattering the idea of authority."[1]

Against such individualism, Zagzebski argues trusting others often makes it much more likely for us to attain true beliefs and avoid false beliefs. We do not have to try to find out everything about the world on our own but can divide the epistemic labor by working together. Through trusting in testimony, we have access to the knowledge of experts, teachers, reporters, friends, repairers, and so on. And what works on the general level also applies to religion. It is hardly likely that we, alone, are more likely to learn the truths about religious matters than if we work with others:

> Accepting epistemic authority is the conscientious thing to do when we learn that others are epistemically superior to ourselves. Trust in a community that has existed for many hundreds of years is often more conscientious than trusting a community of my contemporaries, and much more conscientious than trusting myself alone. If tradition is the democracy of the dead, as G. K. Chesterton observed, ignoring it is a kind of egoism of the contemporary. (Zagzebski 2012, 199)

But can Protestants also make use of this "democracy of the dead" (Chesterton 1908), or are they doomed to be "epistemic egoists"? Or if not epistemic egoists, then perhaps "egoists of the contemporary", who devalue the wisdom of the Christian tradition? Zagzebski herself does allow that there exist religious communities that differ from the Catholic Church, and that members of a religious community might come to lose trust in the community's authority, which for her provides an important safeguard against religious tyranny (Zagzebski 2012, 116, 223). However, others have indeed argued that Protestantism fails to give the proper epistemic role to tradition and community, the end result being the kind of epistemic egoism or egoism of the contemporary that Zagzebski criticizes. This suspicion is typically centered on the principle of

[1] Zagzebski is far from the only author to make a link between the Reformation and secularization. For example, historian Brad Gregory (2012) lays the blame for the secularization of society partly on Duns Scotus, partly on the Reformation, which, he argues, inadvertently replaced the unity of Christendom with the modern marketplace of ideas. Many of these claims have been protested against by scholars of Scotus and the Reformation. Kilcrease (2023) argues that the metaphysics of Scotus and the Reformers was not much removed from the Medieval era. Wilken (2019), though not responding directly to Gregory, argues that the new emphasis on the freedom of religion in fact grew out of Christian sensibilities.

sola scriptura, the idea that the Bible should be the highest norm of theology, to which other norms must submit.

I have no wish to argue that the formulations by the Catholics or Protestants of the 16th and 17th centuries were the zenith of Christian epistemology of theology (cf. Abraham 2002, Jenson 2011, Schreiner 2011). Nevertheless, sola scriptura was meant to safeguard important theological values, and it is thus of interest to analyze whether sola scripture might be compatible with properly appreciating the social nature of religious rationality.

So, in this article, I will consider two sophisticated, recent arguments against sola scriptura as an epistemological principle. Discussion of the rationality of trusting in others in our collaborative building of knowledge has been a subject of increasing philosophical interest in recent decades and will help understand what Chesterton's "democracy of the dead" might mean as an epistemological principle. I, therefore, consider and respond to both criticisms using recent discussion on the nature of epistemic authority within social epistemology (see Henderson 2020).

The first critique to be considered, by Swedish Catholic philosopher Mats Wahlbeg (2018a) argues that Protestant epistemology gives little reason to value ecumenical councils as divinely guided and authoritative. Instead, these councils will only be treasured insofar as they correspond to what Protestants think is the correct interpretation of Scripture. Wahlberg argues that Catholics have consistent criteria for regarding councils as authoritative and divinely guided, whereas Protestants do not. If correct, this might then seem to make the charge of epistemic egoism or egoism of the contemporary against Protestantism plausible (although Wahlberg does not use the term himself). I will call this the "Conciliar Argument Against Protestantism" (CAAP).

The second argument to be considered, by Anglo-American Catholic philosophers Gregory Stacey and Tyler McNabb (2024), claims that reliance on sola scriptura makes Protestantism self-undermining in a way that can only be redeemed by trusting in tradition and the teaching of the churches, which, Stacey and McNabb argue, Protestants with their more individualistic theological epistemology fail to do. The argument focuses particularly on the principle of the clarity of Scripture. I will call this the "Scriptural Argument Against Dogmatic Protestantism" (SAADP), following the terminology coined by Stacey and McNabb.

I will begin by introducing the idea of Sola Scriptura, and then move on to consider the two criticisms.

1.2. Classical Protestantism and the Apparent Value of Tradition

Protestantism itself can well be described as a developing theological tradition, which has since the reformation split into many separate streams. Indeed, one does not need to read classical Protestant writings and confessional documents much to notice that Protestants do, in fact, greatly value tradition and the teaching of their churches as sources of religious knowledge. For example, the Lutheran *Book of Concord* shows this already in the introduction, appealing for support not only to the "firm testimonies of Scripture", but also to "the ancient and accepted symbols" and the "perpetual consensus of the truly believing Church". (*Book of Concord*, Preface, 3. Transl. 1921.) Even the existence of such confessional documents, and the efforts of the Protestants to teach people, cannot be understood if the Protestants only saw the Bible itself as epistemically valuable. After all, if they had thought *epistemic egoism* was the right policy for religious matters, then the more likely course of action would have been to just leave people to read Bibles on their own.

Although Protestants emphasize the importance of having a strong biblical basis for doctrine, the appeal to tradition can be seen in theological content as well. In the *Book of Concord*, this appears, for example, in the appended *Catalog of Testimonies*, which lists many quotations from the Fathers in support. But it also features prominently in the Lutheran defense of infant baptism based on Church history. The statement of this argument by Martin Luther in his *Large Catechism* (1529) is worth quoting at length:

> That the Baptism of infants is pleasing to Christ is sufficiently proved from His own work, namely, that God sanctifies many of them who have been thus baptized, and has given them the Holy Ghost [. . .] But if God did not accept the baptism of infants, He would not give the Holy Ghost nor any of His gifts to any of them; in short, during this long time unto this day no man upon earth could have been a Christian. Now, since God confirms Baptism by the gifts of His Holy Ghost, as is plainly perceptible in some of the church fathers, as St. Bernard, Gerson, John Hus, and others, who were baptized in infancy, and since the holy Christian Church cannot perish until the end of the world, they must acknowledge that such infant baptism is pleasing to God. [. . .] This is indeed the best and strongest proof for the simple-minded and unlearned. For they shall not take from us or overthrow this article: I believe a holy Christian Church, the communion of saints. (Luther, *The Large Catechism*, 49–51, in the *Book of Concord*. See further Arffman 1993).

Not all Protestants agree with Luther's argument—Baptists, for example, believe that the Bible contradicts the practice so clearly that the weight of this thousand-year tradition is overruled (Collins & Walls 2017, 145–150). But Luther's example

does show how even early Protestants did not appeal merely to the Bible in their theological reasoning, but also valued the testimony of tradition and the churches.

1.3. Sola Scriptura vs. Ecumenical Councils?

Regardless of how Protestants utilized tradition, however, it could be that something about Protestant epistemology contradicts such practices. Perhaps, for example, the principle of sola scriptura would, when consistently applied, make it impossible to see any epistemic weight to tradition and church teaching.

Sola scriptura is among the most controversial principles in theology, sometimes being seen as the necessary ground for a biblical Christianity, and at other points as leading to an unacceptable and self-contradictory individualism. If the principle is understood as implying that the Bible stands alone as the sole authority of theology, then this raises a number of difficult questions. For example, do we not need the testimony and work of previous generations of Christians to even have Bibles translated into our modern languages, and presented to us as the authoritative canon of Christian scripture? How can we even know which books are supposed to be in Bible, if we were to rely on Scripture alone?

In response, it seems clear that Scripture, as the late Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson points out, was never meant by classical Protestants to function without "creed, teaching office, or authoritative liturgy" (Jenson 1997, 28). Thus, a more plausible way to understand sola scriptura is to understand it not as "scripture alone" but as "scripture first" (Vanhoozer 2018). The principle is meant to convey the supreme authority of the Bible, as divinely authorized revelation, over all religious traditions and teachings that transmit and interpret this revelation. As the *Book of Concord* puts the point, "The Word of God is and should remain the sole rule and norm of all doctrine, to which the writings of no man should be regarded as equal, but to which everything must be subjected." (*Formula of Concord, Solida Declaratio, Rule and Norm*, 9)

As noted, the principles of 16th and 17th century theology do not necessarily represent the apex of theological epistemology on either the Protestant or Catholic side (Schreiner 2011, Abraham 2003, Dulles 1980), but this does not mean the insights of the era are not still worth heeding. The classical principles form a coherent package, where altering one part will affect others. For instance, if Scripture is to function as such a "norm above norms" (*norma normans non normata*), then Scripture must be clear at least to some extent, for if it could be understood only through an authority's interpretation, then it could not have any power over those interpretations (Webster 2004). Moreover, Scripture must contain or imply all that is necessary for salvation, for if some other doctrine were

necessary in this way, then that would have to be taught in the churches as equally authoritative to the Bible. In this way, Scripture was envisioned to be able to adjudicate disagreements in the tradition, as Luther states succinctly:

> Tell me, if you can, what criteria might be used to solve a question, if the Fathers have disagreed on it among themselves? In such cases, the solution must be arrived at based on the Bible, which would be impossible, unless we give the Bible the first place in all matters that is usually given to the Fathers. This means that the Bible in itself is the most certain, easy to understand, clear, self-interpreting, the tester of all claims by all men, which judges and enlightens, as is written in Psalm 119. (Luther, WA 7, 97:19; see further Juntunen 2004.)

Notably, as Sullivan (1996, 45) points out, "there is no evidence that the bishops who took part in the councils of the first millennium were explicitly aware of the infallibility of their decisions." This provides, it seems, a formidable challenge to any who would argue that the testimony of the tradition, or of the councils, must be seen to be infallible to be authoritative or valuable.

Nevertheless, the Protestant heavy emphasis on the superiority of Scripture makes it understandable why Protestantism has sometimes been suspected of dismissing the importance of tradition altogether. After all, if Scripture is in all ways superior as a source of theological knowledge, then it might seem that importance of tradition and community are comparatively far less important. Moreover, the disagreements of the tradition might make it very difficult to discern where tradition is guiding us. I will now turn to Wahlberg's development of the critique of sola scriptura.

2. The Conciliar Argument Against Protestantism: Are Ecumenical Councils of Any Value for Protestants?

2.1. Wahlberg's Critique of Protestant Theological Epistemology

Wahlberg's criticism of Protestantism takes aim at the cogency of trusting in ecumenical councils, if sola scriptura is accepted. Wahlberg's target is the formulation by Kenneth J. Collins and Jerry L. Walls, in their book *Roman But Not Catholic* (2017), a modern defense of Protestantism as a faithful continuation of the Christian tradition. In Wahlberg's words, Collins and Walls are Protestants who "recognize—and have good reason to recognize—the importance and authority of tradition, the Church Fathers, and the ecumenical councils." (Wahlberg 2018a). However, Wahlberg argues that their defense of Protestantism fails to respond to John Henry Newman's (1845 [1909]) questions on the consistent criteria for tradition's authoritativeness. The argument is that ultimately Protestants have no consistent criteria for considering aspects of the

tradition like Church councils are authoritative. Instead, the affirmation that the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed of 381, for example, is authoritative, should also lead to the recognition of many non-Protestant doctrines by the same light. In other words, as Newman states, Protestantism "cannot at once condemn St. Thomas and St. Bernard, and defend St. Athanasius and St. Gregory Nazianzen" as authoritative (Newman 1845 [1909], 8).

For example, if the ecumenical councils were authoritative only because their teachings correspond with our understanding of Scripture, then this, Wahlberg points out, would mean judging the councils by the Bible rather than allowing conciliar teaching to authoritatively direct our biblical interpretation. This, Wahlberg concludes, would reduce the Protestant position inexorably back to "vulgar" sola scriptura. After all,

> even those who endorse sola scriptura in its most simple and literal form can agree that any statement that correctly captures what the Bible teaches should be believed. Such an attitude does not entail a respect for authorities other than the Bible—it simply entails a general respect for truths the Bible teaches. (Wahlberg 2018a)

Another possible Protestant defense of the ecumenical councils would be to argue that they represent the unified testimony of the ancient, ecumenical Christian Church, which gives them unique authority in comparison to later innovations in the tradition, such as Marian dogmas. Nicaea has been "defended over and over again by great theologians and biblical scholars down the centuries," Collins and Walls (2018) note, and this gives it additional authority. Wahlberg (2018b) points out, however, that councils like Nicaea and Chalcedon themselves were in fact not universally accepted by all who considered themselves to be Christians in their time (see e.g. Behr 2001). For a long time afterwards, "Arian" and "Nestorian" Christianity were still the only forms of Christianity in some areas of the world. Thus, the councils do not represent the unified testimony of the ancient Church, but only the testimony that became the dominant majority position.

One possibility would be to claim that the later recognition of the authoritative nature of these councils by the majority suffices to ground their authoritative nature. But Wahlberg argues that this would undermine many Protestant beliefs as well: if mere majority belief in the Trinity were sufficient for authoritativeness, then this might also lead to other, later majority-supported doctrines becoming

authoritative, from Marian dogmas to apostolic succession as a criterion of Church authority (similarly Moss 2015).[2]

Wahlberg (2018a) argues that given the disagreement of Christians, ultimately the only way to judge what councils are authoritative is to rely on a "divinely authorized interpreter" that can be identified by a formal, external criterion, namely "apostolic succession in the episcopate, and episcopal communion with the pope." As *Lumen Gentium* (25) puts the idea of the required "religious submission of mind", "in matters of faith and morals, the bishops speak in the name of Christ and the faithful are to accept their teaching and adhere to it with a religious assent."[3] Once the Magisterium in which this apostolic succession is embodied has made some decision in a council, this can be recognized as authoritative by reference to this external criterion. But the Catholic Magisterium, as thus defined, has recognized not merely Nicaea, but also the council of Trent (1545-1563) as well as Vatican I (1869-1870) and Vatican II (1962-1965) as authoritative. If Protestants cannot supply a consistent alternative criterion for following only part of the tradition, then Protestantism will fall back to "vulgar" sola scriptura, Wahlberg concludes. If correct, this would seem to make it difficult for Protestants to avoid an epistemic egoism or an egoism of the contemporary.

[2] This article is not the place to consider in detail what the testimony of the tradition implies on topics like the authority of the papacy and the Marian dogmas. For a recent Protestant exploration, see Ortlund 2024.

[3] *Lumen Gentium* (25) is worth quoting here more extensively as well, to provide more context for Wahlberg's succinct formulation: "Bishops, teaching in communion with the Roman Pontiff, are to be respected by all as witnesses to divine and Catholic truth. In matters of faith and morals, the bishops speak in the name of Christ and the faithful are to accept their teaching and adhere to it with a religious assent. This religious submission of mind and will must be shown in a special way to the authentic magisterium of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking ex cathedra; that is, it must be shown in such a way that his supreme magisterium is acknowledged with reverence, the judgments made by him are sincerely adhered to, according to his manifest mind and will. [. . .] Although the individual bishops do not enjoy the prerogative of infallibility, they nevertheless proclaim Christ's doctrine infallibly whenever, even though dispersed through the world, but still maintaining the bond of communion among themselves and with the successor of Peter, and authentically teaching matters of faith and morals, they are in agreement on one position as definitively to be held. This is even more clearly verified when, gathered together in an ecumenical council, they are teachers and judges of faith and morals for the universal Church, whose definitions must be adhered to with the submission of faith."(Vatican 1964) Sullivan (1996) presents a nuanced reading of what "submission of mind" and "submission of faith" mean here, arguing that this is not meant to rule out reasoned disagreement by theologians on matters that have not been infallibly defined.

2.2. Wahlberg and Zagzebski's Preemption View of Epistemic Authority

What is the concept of authority underlying Wahlberg's criterion, and might Protestants find some consistent alternative criteria? It is important to note here that Catholic understanding of infallible authority is not necessarily uniform or simple itself. Instead, the questions of how to recognize the authoritative pronouncements of the Magisterium and how to distinguish between infallible and non-infallible Magisterial teaching, and how the faithful's attitude of "submission of mind" should differ in these cases, has provoked complex discussions (e.g. Sullivan 1996, Anton 2021).

As described, Wahlberg's criterion of "apostolic succession in the episcopate, and episcopal communion with the pope" seeks to highlight the highest level of authoritative Christian teaching, calling us to submit to it. With respect to councils, the criterion seems to leave little room for distinguishing between the varied authority of different councils, for example. This means that the doctrine of the Trinity, affirmed at Nicaea and Constantinople, and papal infallibility, affirmed at Vatican I, have precisely the same level of warrant on the basis of the formal criterion. It does not seem to provide any way for us to say, for example, that the more ancient status or more universal acceptance of Nicaea-Constantinople might make its decisions more authoritative.

Also, on this criterion, it does not seem that we can plausibly call tradition "the democracy of the dead," to return to Chesterton's phrase used by Zagzebski. After all, the testimonial "vote" of the majority is not evaluated by the criterion—what matters is that part of the tradition which fulfils the formal criterion of the apostolic succession of bishops in communion with the pope. It also becomes unclear why ecumenical councils should have more authority than papal encyclicals or other pronouncements that are also approved by the Magisterium. All of these are to be reacted to with a "submission of mind", even though some might be more authoritative in principle.

Within social epistemology, this kind of deference to a recognized authority recalls the "preemption view" of epistemic authority, defended by Zagzebski (2012), as well as Constantin and Grundmann (2020). On this view, once we have identified a relevant epistemic authority (such as an expert in some field), we should defer (submit) to their judgment over our own ideas, allowing their view to "preempt" our own reasoning. The authority's testimony is not to be treated as evidence, to be aggregated and weighed up against the rest of our evidence. This is because (as previously stated) this is believed to increase our chances of getting at true beliefs and avoid false beliefs. Applying it to the issue at hand, we should use external formal criteria only to recognize the Catholic Magisterium as the authority to be intellectually submitted to, but not to evaluate the contents of

their pronouncements (other than to identify where they are using their authority).[4]

Wahlberg (2014) has much more to say on the nature of authority, but agrees with not treating testimony as evidence, but as a *sui generis* source of knowledge, as is done on the preemption view. However, this seems to result in problems, since Catholics also generally want to say that the authority of the Magisterium does not provide their sole reason for believing in Catholic doctrines. Rather, factors like biblical witness, religious experience, and reasoning also act to motivate their beliefs. Nevertheless, if testimony is a *sui generis* source of knowledge, as the preemption view and Wahlberg argue, then it is difficult to see how aggregating and weighing it in relation to our other evidence will be possible (see Lackey 2018).

On Zagzebski's account, the core of the preemption view is precisely that the authority's testimony overrides our own reasoning, and we follow the authority's judgments as they are. Using Joseph Raz's "track record argument", Zagzebski argues that any deviation from an expert's opinion caused by our own opinions will on average merely cause us to deviate from the truth.[5] As Jennifer Lackey points out, the basic idea is intuitive enough: "if I recognize that someone is better than I am at getting at the truth in a given area, wouldn't it be better epistemically for me to just wholly defer to her rather than aggregating her input with my own views on the topic?"[6]

Yet it seems many Catholics would also want to say that different statements of the tradition have different levels of epistemic authority, and that we can aggregate the evidence given by the tradition's testimony with our own understanding of the Bible. Even different statements of particular Church councils, which fulfil Wahlberg's formal criterion, and different statements within papal letters, need to be seen as having different levels of authority.[7] So, it

[4] My analysis of the preemption view and the expert-as-advisor view draws on my previous work; see Kojonen, forthcoming a.

[5] Raz 1988, 68–69; Zagzebski 2012, 114–117.

[6] Lackey, 2021, 136.

[7] See e.g. Sullivan 1996. As one example, some of the Fourth Lateran Council's statements in continue to be well regarded, such as the principle in canon 2 that "between creator and creature there can be noted no similarity so great that a greater dissimilarity cannot be seen between them", and the many ideas for Church reform. However, problems abound as well: the third canon decrees the expulsion of heretics from Christian communities by use of force, while the 68th canon decrees that Jews and Saracens should wear distinctive clothes, and should not appear in public during the last three days of Easter. Canon 69 prohibits Jews and pagans from holding public offices, on the grounds that "it would be too absurd for a blasphemer of Christ to exercise power over Christians." The finale in canon 71 calls for the (failed) Fifth Crusade, granting pardon for sins for those participating. One way to safeguard conciliar infallibity in the face of such decisions would be to argue that God only protects conciliar decisions regarding faith and morals from error, leaving the bishops free to make mistakes on legal and political issues (cf. Sullivan

seems there is reason to take into account broader criteria than merely the apostolic succession of bishops in communion with the pope, when formulating our understanding of the authority of tradition.

Such error correction is in full view in councils like Vatican II, and the possibility of dissenting from the Magisterium has recently also been emphasized by conservative Catholics due to their disagreements with pope Francis (e.g. Feser 2018). As Joseph Ratzinger (later to become Benedict XVI) pointed out, "There is a distorting, as well as legitimate tradition. [. . .] Consequently, tradition must not be considered only affirmatively, but also critically." (Ratzinger 1969, 193; quoted by Moss 2015, 77). Moreover, as Dulles notes, while on the Catholic understanding the Bible cannot stand alone, there is also some sense in which the Bible still retains primacy and can correct tradition—although it can be difficult to answer questions like, "how the Bible can judge tradition if its right interpretation depends, in part, upon tradition."[8]

Rather, it seems that the preemption model, and reliance on the formal criterion of an authority that is to be submitted to, may not be the best way to understand how that error correction works. This is because, as Lackey (2021) notes, on this model our own evidence is normatively "screened off". So, we need another model to make sense of how Christians can recognize not only the value, but also the potential errors of the tradition and their communities.

2.3. An Alternative Understanding of Tradition as the "Democracy of the Dead"

One classical model of theological authority is stated succinctly by Vincent of Lerins' (d. 445) criterion of "what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all" (cf. Pelikan 1971). Application of the Vincentian canon is not simple: it is rare to find agreement "everywhere, always, by all", and he himself recognized in his *Communitorium* that the tradition also contains disagreement. Nevertheless, the core idea can be restated as the claim that apostolicity (in the sense of continuity with the ancient apostolic ideas), widespread support across diverse contexts, have often been seen by Christians as features that increase the epistemic weight of the tradition's testimony. Such criteria do help in making sense of why the council of Nicaea in 325, for example, has greater weight when compared to the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. Nicaea is simply earlier and more closely connected to be apostolic tradition, more broadly accepted in both the East and the West, and accepted by many more Christians over the centuries. Protestant

1996, 54–55). However, this is also not simple, because the council itself appeals to both theological and moral reasons to justify some of its problematic decisions. In any case, we need further criteria to argue that this council is not equally authoritative as Nicaea.

[8] Dulles 1980, 17.

denominations, too, have generally held to Trinitarian doctrine, adding support to the view of these ideas as having withstood the test of time.[9]

But how might we take all of these factors into account in our evaluation of the evidence given by tradition? Jennifer Lackey (2018) has formulated what she calls the "expert-as-advisor" view, in contrast to the preemption view, which she terms the "expert-as-authority" view. On the expert-as-advisor view, the testimony of experts should be understood as evidence that we can evaluate in conjunction with the rest of the evidence we have available. This then also allows us to accord different epistemic weight to the testimony of different experts, and to aggregate the testimony of multiple experts (and non-experts) with evidence we personally have access to form an overall picture. I believe understanding testimony as evidence in this way allows making better sense of Protestant sensibilities of the fallibility of tradition, as well as of Vincent's criteria and Chesterton's idea of the "democracy of the dead", than the preemption view. As Lackey argues forcefully, this view is also better able to handle expert disagreement (since the overall weight of the evidence might still prefer one view) and allows better handling of cases of expert errors and expert corruption (Lackey 2021; cf. Grundmann 2021).

If we encounter an infallible authority, then it makes sense to defer to their view. However, the infallibility of tradition is denied by Protestants, and is not generally required for testimony to be valuable. To use an analogy, I believe psychological research literature generally contains many useful insights on human mental processes and wellbeing. However, at the same time, my knowledge of the replication crisis that has hit this field of research particularly hard (Ionnidis 2005, see further De Ridder 2022) causes me to take psychological research findings with a grain of salt, particularly as I am also aware of the result that laypersons are often able to intuitively predict which social science results will get replicated in testing (Hoogeveen et al 2020).[10]

Nevertheless, my knowledge of the fallible nature of scientific authority does not mean that I do not still greatly value psychological research results—particularly those that have withstood much testing in that tradition of inquiry.

[9] Similarly, Sullivan (1996, 44) states that one might evaluate councils by evaluating whether "from the study of the history of the council, for which its *acta* are of primary importance, it can become clear that the council was summoned to deal with a dispute about a particular point of Christian doctrine, that it did in fact issue its judgment on this question, and that in the aftermath of the council its judgment was generally received as definitive, and has continued to determine the faith of the church. Here the reception of the conciliar decision by the church at large is a key element in the discernment that its judgment was truly definitive." This then locates conciliar authority not merely in the fulfilment of some formal criterion of episcopal communion with the Roman pontiff, but also takes into account the testimony of the whole Church.

[10] For further analysis of the similarities and differences between religious and scientific trust, see Kojonen, forthcoming b.

Analogously, Protestant knowledge of places where Church tradition has got things wrong can justify taking tradition with a grain of salt. However, this does not mean tradition should not still be understood to have a great epistemic weight—particularly regarding central doctrines that have plausible apostolic origins, that have stood the test of time, and that have been supported by most holy and wise Christian saints and theologians.

We can also apply this to Chesterton's idea of tradition as the "democracy of the dead". "Democracy" would imply that everyone's witness has some weight—not just the testimony of a select few authorized by the Magisterium. It seems that on views which see testimony as evidence (such as the expert-as-advisor view), this democratic view becomes much more plausible and intuitive than on the preemption view (on which testimony is a *sui generis* source of knowledge that cannot be aggregated). It also accords well with Protestant views. As Collins and Walls (2018) note, the principles of *sola scriptura* themselves lead to the expectation that Church tradition will be able to inform us about the correct interpretation of Scripture. This is "because this principle leads us to think that the early Church, when faced with the need to explicate more precisely the identity and nature of Christ, would get it right" (Collins and Walls 2018). If Scripture is clear in its contents, then one would hardly expect that most Christian interpreters would fully misunderstand it. Thus, when the early Church agreed that Christ is both fully human and fully divine, and most later Christians also agree, then this can plausibly inform our own understanding of the Bible. Based on the clarity of scripture, every reader of Scripture, particularly everyone we recognize as a Christian led by the Holy Spirit (cf. 1. John 2:27), can be admitted as a valid witness, whose testimony will count as evidence.[11]

Viewing evidence as testimony can allow us to see testimony as providing a strong reason to believe something, even if we ourselves have no means to directly check its veracity. This does then allow us to think of certain church traditions, for example, as having great epistemic weight. However, the view also allows us to disagree with experts, when other reasons are sufficient to override expert testimony. Applied to the issue of biblical interpretation, for example, one could think that Church tradition overall supports some interpretation, but the biblical text provides good reason to reject tradition at this point. However, dissent from universally or nearly universally held positions (like the Trinity) would incur an enormous burden of proof for the dissenter. One would have to work much harder to defend one's biblical interpretation in cases where it

[11] On the idea of recognition and its importance for ecumenical dialogue, see Saarinen (2016).

contradicts the testimony of the great majority of holy and well-regarded Christians over the ages.[12]

Seeing testimony as evidence also allows us to use general criteria to evaluate the weight of the tradition's testimony on certain issues. For example, (1) generally testimony is more convincing when it is given by people who are in a position to better know what they are talking about due to factors like their proximity to the events and suitable capability. (2) Testimony from multiple, independent sources with such access is more convincing than testimony from just one source. (3) Ideas that have withstood testing by many qualified persons are typically more reliable than those tested only by some. (4) Testimony from sources that might have the motivation to deny the reported facts ("hostile witnesses", in court terminology), or who otherwise have little motivation to mislead us is noteworthy. In contrast, for example, testimony that merely transmits the tales given by some questionable prior source does not add credibility to that prior source, and testimony that is given as a response to the threat of force is hardly to be believed as genuine.

Using such criteria that are generally applicable to testimony, it does not seem arbitrary at all to conclude that testimony about Christian religious matters should also be considered more weighty when it is closely connected to ancient apostolic teaching, widely shared, and has withstood the test of time. The Nicaea-Constantinople creed of 381 and Chalcedon in 451 fulfill these criteria very well—and the recent ecumenical agreements with non-Chalcedonian, miaphysite Christians on the central points of doctrine further supports the basic ideas of two-nature Christology, for example (see Vatican 1994). Despite some disagreement in both cases, it is plausible that these solutions did follow apostolic precedent, and were widely shared not only by the diverse Christian communities of their era, but also afterwards. It is also plausible that the result of Nicaea-Constantinople was not forced by the emperors, but emerged more organically—if anything, political forces might have led the homoiousians to triumph (cf. Young 2020). Protestants, too, have overwhelmingly agreed with these doctrines, despite their critique of some other Church traditions, and their emphasis on testing doctrines with the Bible—in effect providing a somewhat independent witness of the biblical nature of the Trinity. Moreover, the doctrines are widely perceived as safeguarding central Christian commitments and spiritual practices. All this gives these traditions a great deal of epistemic weight, which means that any Christian wanting to question these doctrines bears an enormous burden of proof, as discussed—and it is not arbitrary to say that the

[12] Church councils are not held to by Protestants to be infallible, however. Thus a few Protestants have argued even that the council of Nicaea gets some details of the doctrine of the Trinity wrong (e.g. Mullins 2016, 280–284).

support of the tradition for the doctrine of the Trinity is thus clearly greater and weightier than its support (or lack of it) for papal infallibility, for example.

However, accepting the "democracy of the dead", Protestants can also believe that the testimony of Thomas Aquinas, or even the Trent or Vatican I and II also have epistemic value. The value of later councils may well be seen as having less weight than the previous ones based on the previous criteria. The decisions of these councils are not nearly as widely shared, nor perceived as equally central for Christianity. Moreover, Protestants may have reason to see the counter-testimony of their own churches as more persuasive, and might see later councils as depending, at points, on questionable prior decisions that reduce the weight of their testimony. But even given that the testimony of intellectual giants like Aquinas is weighty, this does not mean that respected theologians, understood as advising experts, cannot be disagreed with. For example, some Protestants might think that they have biblical, traditional, and philosophical reasons to dissent from the Aristotelian-Thomistic system (which is not universally believed by Catholics either).

The expert-as-advisor view can also make sense of why work in the history of dogma matters for the authority of the tradition (cf. Pelikan 1971). For example, it matters to the authority of Nicaea that it was not some innovation against the teaching of the previous centuries, but a natural progression of apostolic understanding (Anatolios 2011). However, on the view that Nicaea is accepted solely based on the authority of the present-day Magisterium, it is hard to see why such considerations make any difference. This seems both unintuitive and contrary to the purpose of considering the testimony of the tradition as important.[13]

2.4. Conclusion to the Evaluation of the Conciliar Argument Against Protestantism (CAAP)

I have argued that there is nothing necessarily arbitrary about Protestant recognition of early Church councils as particularly authoritative for the Christian tradition, and in Protestant use of Church tradition and Church teaching as fallible, but important guides to Biblical interpretation. I have also pointed to ways in which Catholics, too, require a multifaceted account of how

[13] Collins and Walls (2018) also point to the Orthodox Church as a counterexample – is it really the case that Orthodox Christians are also only able to recognize valid ecumenical councils with the aid of the Roman Catholic magisterium. In reply, Wahlberg (2018b) points out that Orthodox agree on Catholics in most things, and notes that they are also mostly happy to recognize the pope as the first among the bishops. However, this reply seems to miss the point Collins and Walls were making: the Orthodox do not see submission to the pope as a criterion for the authority of the councils.

different parts of the tradition, and different parts of Magisterial teaching, provide different levels of epistemic support for Christian beliefs and biblical interpretations, as well as allowance for error correction. This then serves, I believe, to bring Protestants and Catholics ecumenically closer.

However, although what I have said suffices to show that the CAAP does not show Protestantism to be "epistemic egoism" or "egoism of the contemporary", it is important to note that it does not fully respond to all facets of Wahlberg's criticism. Wahlberg would admit that Protestants can also rely on theological experts using their natural reasoning, and that the testimony of ordinary Christians probably has some epistemic value. Nevertheless, Wahlberg wants to argue that Christian theological authority is not merely that enjoyed by normal "experts as advisors", but that part of the tradition has special divinely given, infallible authority. This would make Holy Spirit-guided papal infallible pronouncements and Church councils binding for Christians, not merely important (but ultimately fallible) guides as in the model I have presented.

Protestants would demur from giving infallible authority to the tradition, no matter how great the importance of councils is. Protestantism does leave room for the idea that God guides the tradition somehow—recall Luther's insistence that God has protected his Church from error in the case of baptism, following Matthew 16:18. Protestants might thus be more inclined to argue that the "democracy of the dead" is based on God's guidance of the whole Church over time; the guidance promised in 1. John 2:27 being applied to all believers, despite the diversity of what these believers think about Christian doctrine. In any case, recognizing the epistemic value of the tradition with consistent criteria does not require seeing the tradition as infallible.

However, for future work, while models in social epistemology are useful, they have ultimately been developed to deal first and foremost with human epistemic authority, but Christians believe the Holy Spirit is also always active in the witness of the Church. This should surely make a difference for a full account of Christian witness and testimony, as Ida Heikkilä (2023) argues. For now, I turn to a second potential argument for why Protestantism might lead to epistemic egoism.

3. The Scriptural Argument Against Dogmatic Protestantism (SAADP)

3.1. Why Protestantism Might Undermine Itself

Might something about Protestant theological epistemology be not only epistemically egoist, but also ultimately self-refuting? Gregory Stacey and Tyler McNabb have developed what they call the "Scriptural Argument Against Dogmatic Protestantism" (SAADP), which is meant to parallel philosopher Alvin

Plantinga's "Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism" (EAAN) (Plantinga 2012, 339–346; see further Neels 2022, Slagle 2023). Plantinga's argument is that naturalists who believe that evolution was unguided thus have a reason not to trust in the reliability of their reasoning faculties. This is because, Plantinga claims, an unguided evolutionary process would not be expected to create reliable faculties. However, if we cannot trust in our rational faculties, then neither can we trust our conclusion that evolution was unguided by God. Thus, Plantinga concludes that a purely naturalistic view of evolution ultimately undermines its own rational basis.

Stacey and McNabb argue that Protestantism undermines itself for those Protestants who both (1) are "dogmatic" in the sense of believing that "the Romans and Eastern churches have fallen into serious theological error" (Stacey and McNabb 2024, 3), where this is a central motivation for being Protestant, and (2) affirm Sola Scriptura in the senses that (a) the Bible is uniquely authoritative in comparison to other sources of religious knowledge, and (b) that the Bible teaches all truths which one must believe to be saved, either explicitly or implicitly. Their goal is thus not to target a "vulgar" form of sola scriptura. Rather, they allow that Protestants can and do affirm sources of knowledge like "philosophical argument, Christian tradition, and private religious experience" (Stacey and McNabb 2024, 7).

Why, then, should such tradition-respecting, doctrinally committed Protestantism be self-undermining? According to Stacey and McNabb (2024, 11), the core issue is that it is "difficult to discern God's teaching in the Bible without recourse to other sources of religious knowledge". Against the Reformation principle that the Scriptures are clear in their core teachings, Stacey and McNabb argue that

> it's very difficult for Christians to decide on the correct hermeneutic or to access accurate information needed to arrive at confident historical-critical readings of Scripture, unless they rely on extra-Biblical sources of religious knowledge such as Christian tradition, Magisterial teaching, or religious experience. The Bible itself supplies neither the hermeneutic, nor the historical record. And even with these tools in hand, their exegetical application is difficult and involves contestable judgements. (Stacey and McNabb 2024, 12)

This difficulty is also reflected, they argue, in the widespread disagreement among even scholars about how to correctly understand the teachings of the Biblical authors. Both the theoretical difficulties involved, and the extensive disagreements we can observe, then indicate that the epistemic probability of any individual Christian interpreting Scripture correctly on their own is very low, Stacey and McNabb argue. But if our probability of understanding the Bible on our own is not high, then the Protestants cannot be confident in their assessment

that Catholic and Orthodox doctrine is wrong. Thus understood, "Dogmatic Protestantism", meaning Protestantism motivated by theological reasons, coupled with an insistence on the clarity and sufficiency of Scripture, ultimately collapses when the difficulty of biblical interpretation is taken into account. Protestants just cannot be all that certain about their theological commitments, which means that they should also not have confidence in identifying theological errors on the side of Catholicism or Orthodox Christianity.

Stacey and McNabb themselves do believe that Christians can actually be confident about the Bible's teachings even despite scholarly disagreement. But this is because Christians do not have to interpret Scripture alone. They argue that Catholic and Orthodox Christians

> Can claim confidence that the Bible teaches these doctrines because (say), their church traditions have authoritatively interpreted the Bible as teaching these doctrines. Likewise, they can claim to be confident in the adoption of a particular Biblical hermeneutic because it is endorsed by their church tradition or magisterium. (Stacey and McNabb 2024, 13)

Stacey and McNabb consider some possible Protestant replies, such as the idea that Church tradition might also help Protestants correctly interpret Scripture. However, they point out that the tradition is also difficult to interpret on one's own (which, as they see it, is what Protestants need to do in the absence of properly *authoritative* Church guidance). Moreover, they argue that the early tradition does not support most Protestant doctrines, so Protestants will have to regard tradition as largely unreliable (similarly Moss 2015, Wahlberg 2018). This, then, means that tradition will not be of much help to the Protestant interpreter of. In other words, Protestantism results in a self-undermining kind of epistemic egoism or egoism of the contemporary.

3.2. Disagreements on the Clarity of Scripture

Whether Stacey's and McNabb's argument is convincing will partly depend on empirical views about how we evaluate the traditions' diverse testimony, the extent of disagreement about biblical interpretation, and whether the Bible manages to teach anything clearly. Plantinga's EAAN is meant to argue against naturalism based on premises that are internal to the naturalist's position (whether Plantinga is successful in this is debated). To be fully analogous, it seems SAADP should similarly be based on premises that the Protestant already agrees with, or that they at least have reason to agree with based on evidence easily accessible to them. But does SAADP manage to do this?

It seems not. On the issue of following the tradition's testimony, Protestants have tended to see the tradition as either complex and ambivalent or as broadly supportive of Protestantism on many issues (see e.g. Ortlund 2024; Collins & Walls 2017). Moreover, as noted in sections 1.2. and 1.3., Protestants have not classically understood sola scriptura to mean "only Scripture", so Protestant tradition and the work of Protestant churches and academics could not help readers find reliable ways of interpreting the Bible and understanding the teachings of the tradition.

On theological disagreement, Stacey and McNabb correctly point out that Protestants can well be assumed to be aware of its existence. One can find examples of inter-Protestants disagreement already early on in the Reformation, as with the later Melanchton's disagreement with Luther on free will.[14] Many Protestants have also found theological disagreement among those who believe in *sola scriptura* highly troubling (e.g. Abraham 2003, 164), and the promise of greater stability and unity in the Catholic and Orthodox churches often features in conversion stories, although others would respond by arguing that Catholics and Orthodox also have their divisions and disagreements (e.g. Collins & Walls 2017, 374–400; cf. Gage 2019).

However, at the same time, most Protestants would not think that disagreements about the interpretation of Scripture invalidate the doctrine of the clarity of scripture. This is both because of the nature of the doctrine itself, and because there is also much evidence of convergence in the interpretation of Scripture across theologians from different backgrounds. They would also argue that disagreement can be partly explained by factors other than the ambiguity of Scripture.

Protestants have somewhat different formulations of *claritas scripturae*: For example, Luther (1525 [1823], sec. 2) argues that all scripture is clear in itself, and the difficulty of interpretation is only on our end, due to factors like human sin, false presuppositions, and lack of knowledge of the language. Meanwhile, Turretin (1679 [1992], I:II) believes that God has purposefully made some things in Scripture more difficult to understand, while leaving the gospel message clear. But both imply that what Bible teaches is not always necessarily clear to us—that would be itself contradicted by Scripture, since 2 Peter 3:15–16 states that Paul's letters contain some teachings that are difficult to understand. Rather, the doctrine claims that some things in the Bible are indeed clearly taught, and that the Bible needs to be understandable at least to some extent in order to have any authority in the life of the Church.[15]

[14] See Graybill 2010.

[15] See further Webster (2004), Juntunen (2004), as well as Mannermaa (2010) and Saarinen (2017). As Saarinen points out, it is interesting that for Luther, it seems even common sense can

There is also support in Church tradition for such an understanding. For example, Augustine stated that:

> the Holy Spirit has, with admirable wisdom and care for our welfare, so arranged the Holy Scriptures as by the plainer passages to satisfy our hunger, and by the more obscure to stimulate our appetite. For almost nothing is dug out of those obscure passages which may not be found set forth in the plainest language elsewhere. (*On Christian Doctrine*, II, 6.8)

When some parts of Scripture are said to be difficult to understand, it is also implied that some others are not—and perhaps, that the difficult passages might be understood in light of the clearer ones. Stating that there is disagreement about some issues would at best be evidence that these particular teachings are more difficult—but this would not yet mean the Bible is not clear on other issues, even some issues on which Christians disagree.

If disagreement provides evidence against clarity at some points, agreement might conversely provide evidence for clarity. For example, reading diverse commentaries of Paul's letters, it seems that scholars are largely able to agree on many core features of Paul's thinking, such as that humanity needs salvation from sin and death, that Jesus Christ is our Saviour, and even many other more specific features of Paul's thought (compare e.g. Fitzmyer 2008; Keener 2009; Hahn 2017). And even on those issues where commentators disagree, this need not mean one cannot side more with one side or recognize that one side is clearly reading the text in a way that does not reliably capture the meaning of the text, but rather represents a reading of one's dogmatic convictions into the text (e.g. Hahn 2017; cf. Anton 2019).

In ecumenical dialogue, the wide agreement between Lutherans and Roman Catholics in the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justifcation* (Lutheran World Federation 1999 [2020]), which has since also been approved by Methodist, Anglican, and Reformed churches, shows that there is a great deal of common ground in the reading of Scripture. This is not to say that Protestants and Catholics necessarily agree on everything that is important related to justification—a great deal of work remains to be done (Anton 2019). Protestant readers of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, too, can largely agree with much of what they find written there, and in many other Catholic documents and writings. As just some anecdotal evidence of this, in my own country, Finland, Pope Benedict XVI's books on Jesus of Nazareth received highly positive reception among conservative Lutherans (Vähäsarja 2012).

---

sometimes be considered an impediment to correctly understanding the Bible. This has often been criticized for neglecting the value of coherence in theology (e.g. Visala and Vainio, 2020).

As Stacey and McNabb note, lack of clarity is not necessarily the only possible explanation for the divergence of readings of Scripture:

> Principally, they may suggest that one of sin's noetic effects is a natural hostility towards divine truth, or at least difficulty in comprehending the latter. Thus, sin inhibits the correct interpretation of Scripture. Additionally, they may claim that some disagreement about the interpretation of Scripture is the fruit of failure to endorse Strong SS which leads exegetes to interpret Scripture using extra-Biblical sources (which obscure Scripture's plain teaching, producing divergent readings) or the attempt to apply Scripture to topics on which God does not intend Scripture to teach (say, technical points of philosophical theology). (Stacey and McNabb 2024, 13)

I might add that we also have evidence favoring other explanations for many of the most pressing theological disagreements of our age. Often, theologians (and magisteriums) do have quite a lot to say on the grounding of their theological views, and sometimes this does make it quite apparent that particular theological views and disagreements are not due to the obscurity of the Bible itself, but due to (for example) how other sources and motivations of theology are weighted (Vainio 2010, 77–84). Sometimes explanations of disagreement in terms of, for example, social and historical factors, human cognitive biases or human sin might really be credible. Although I would agree with Stacey and McNabb that these explanations are not applicable to all cases, they nevertheless weaken the inference from disagreement to the idea that the Bible cannot be understood without deferring to an authoritative ecclesial Magisterium.[16]

3.3. SAADP and Social Epistemology

Leaving aside quibbles on the empirical premises of the SAADP, I will note two main issues related to social epistemology. First (1), Stacey's and McNabb's picture of Protestant reading of Scripture seems to assume an individualistic practice, in which Protestants are unable to depend on the teaching and tradition of their churches for help in interpreting Scripture. As they write, stating their argument, "the chances of an *individual* Christian reliably forming true beliefs on doctrines which are controversial amongst Christians are low." (Stacey and McNabb 2024, 19, emphasis mine.)

[16] One way to try to develop the argument from disagreement further would be as a limiter, rather than a refutation of the clarity of scripture. For example, perhaps one might argue that on issues where conscientious Christian interpreters disagree, this might undermine confidence that those dogmatic issues are really essential gospel, for example. However, many of the counterarguments discussed in the main text would undermine this alternative argument as well.

However, such individualism is not implied by *sola scriptura*, as discussed. Protestants following the expert-as-advisor model and the idea of democracy as the "tradition of the dead", for example, can well see the Christian tradition and their present communities as highly valuable and epistemically weighty guides in interpreting Scripture. Sola scriptura, classically understood, merely requires that Scripture, as revelation authorized by God, is more authoritative than tradition and the teachings of the churches, and that Scripture is sufficiently clear to act as such an authority (e.g. Webster 2004). Thus understood, the Protestant sola scriptura is meant to safeguard the possibility of error correction, rather than doing away with tradition and the Church. Such a view might in fact allow for the tradition to provide a stronger witness—because the witness of everyone in the "democracy of the dead" or the great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1) might then be recognized as more valuable (cf. Kelly 2011)

Second (2), Stacey and McNabb utilize disagreement to argue that the meaning of Scripture cannot be ascertained without the aid of a divinely authorized Magisterium. However, this conclusion from disagreement seems either too far-reaching or too narrow, presenting a kind of dilemma. It seems too far-reaching, because disagreement does not necessarily lead to uncertainty, even when there is disagreement among experts, as has been argued by many scholars (e.g. Holley 2012; Zagzebski 2012, 204–228; Bogardus 2013, Baker-Hytch 2018). For example, as Zagzebski points out, people disagree on a wide array of issues. Sometimes the best solution is to seek some middle ground, while at other times one is better off just steadfastly holding to the view of one's community:

> I encounter disagreements between conscientious persons and between such persons and myself about a multitude of issues—the best method for brewing coffee, the sun requirements of Japanese maple trees, the best health plan for the country, to take a few examples at random. In some cases, the disagreement will eventually be settled by evidence both parties accept, but that is not the case for all disagreements [. . .] What is relevant for me is what I conscientiously believe, and what I predict will satisfy my future self-reflection, given what I conscientiously predict about myself. (Zagzebski 2012, 215)

What we do with disagreement depends on the specifics. Sometimes, a proper response might be to modify our confidence in our beliefs, while at other times, we might steadfastly retain our convictions. For example, we might be able to explain the other person's or community's beliefs as the result of processes that do not track truth, or even if we cannot, it might also be possible to think we just intellectually "see" or understand the matter in a way that allows us to retain our belief despite peer disagreement. Sometimes, we might even take the other person's disagreement as itself being evidence of some epistemic error (Bogardus 2013). The issues are quite complex, which makes it difficult to argue directly

from disagreement to the implausibility of steadfastness in our beliefs. (Vainio 2017) Insofar as these philosophical accounts of disagreement are on the right track, then disagreement by itself does not undermine the clarity and sufficiency of Scripture either.

But let us assume that disagreement does undermine confidence generally. We then come to the second horn of the dilemma, because then disagreement would seem to undermine much more than merely Protestantism. How might we, for example, safely conclude that the Catholic Magisterium's views on the interpretation of Scripture are divinely authorized, given that this is also a matter on which conscientious Christian experts disagree on? Moreover, philosophers disagree a great deal on rationality and knowledge, which might then undermine Stacey's and McNabb's reliance on reformed epistemology. And self-undermininglly, philosophers' disagreement on the significance of disagreement might then also undermine any argument based on disagreement, including SAADP.

Stacey and McNabb also argue that disagreement might prevent Protestants from utilizing the tradition or their churches. This is because, they argue, "many early Christian beliefs and practices are rejected by Protestants" (Stacey and McNabb 2024, 15), so Protestants cannot have a very high confidence in the reliability of tradition. Moreover, the views of the Church Fathers on many topics are quite diverse, and Protestants "typically reject the claim that God guides the Church's Magisterial teaching to ensure its reliable accuracy on controversial doctrinal matters" (Stacey and McNabb 2024, 15). In response, Protestants might again contest the picture of Early Christianity as supporting non-Protestantism more than Protestant convictions. They would also argue that tradition and the church need not be infallible to provide reliable guidance on many issues—as noted, the scientific literature is valuable despite not being infallible or in complete agreement (Kojonen, forthcoming b). Admittedly, on issues where early Christians disagreed substantially, the witness of the tradition will be that much weaker. But this does not apply to all cases, and as in other cases of expert disagreement (cf. Lackey 2018), this will not mean there cannot be grounds to see one testimony as more persuasive than the other.

Finally, it is worth noting that there are important theological issues on which the Catholic Magisterium also does not provide hermeneutical clarity. For example, the relationship of free will and predestination, which so divides Protestants, also remains an issue for Catholics in the debates between libertarianism and compatibilism within and between Molinism and Thomism (see further Vainio & Visala 2023). Moreover, trying to identify the authoritative teaching of the Magisterium amidst the disagreements of Popes and councils can also in itself be a complex process that causes disagreements among Catholics (see e.g. Sullivan 1996, Feser 2018, Anton 2019, 2021). Nevertheless, I hope Stacey

and McNabb do not take this lack of Magisterial clarity to mean that nothing can be confidently believed also on such issues based on the Bible, our experience, and philosophical reasoning. But if they do not, then it is unclear why Protestants are in trouble either despite rejecting claims of an infallible Magisterium.

3.4. Conclusion to the Evaluation of SAADP

At the core of Stacey and McNabb (2024, 5) argument is the premise that "P(CR/DP&SS) is low." This means that given "Dogmatic Protestantism" (the claim that non-Protestants are substantially wrong theologically) and sola scriptura, it is unlikely that any confessions are reliable. Their case for this premise rests particularly on theological disagreement, which they use to argue against the clarity of Scripture. Basically, if the Protestant recognizes that large swaths of Christianity have fallen into serious theological error, this is argued to undermine the clarity of Scripture, which should, in turn, undermine Protestant confidence in their own theological positions. In response, I have pointed to places where Protestants might question some of Stacey and McNabb's empirical premises, and have argued that Protestantism can also respect tradition as on the "democracy of the dead" model. I have also pointed out making conclusions about the rationality of beliefs based on disagreement is no simple matter, and might itself easily become self-undermining.

Perhaps Stacey and McNabb might respond that my remarks about the SAADP come from a decidedly more ecumenical standpoint than the "Dogmatic Protestantism" that they had in mind. After all, I appealed to ecumenical advances about topics like justification to make the case that theological disagreement is not as severe as Stacey and McNabb's argument might suppose, despite severe remaining differences. Some "Dogmatic Protestants", however, might dismiss modern ecumenism entirely, and argue that Catholic and Orthodox doctrine endangers salvation. Perhaps there is some point at which such a "Dogmatic Protestant" will no longer be able to see any value in tradition, and will basically see themselves, or their very small Church community, as the only ones following essential Christian convictions. I would agree that such a form of Dogmatic Protestantism might be a more suitable target for SAADP than Protestantism as such.

4. Conclusion

In the contemporary pluralistic intellectual landscape, the commonalities of the different Christian churches are highlighted by their much greater differences from other worldviews and ways of thinking. Ecumenical work, too, has highlighted the way the churches have moved beyond many 16th and 17th century

oppositions and formulations. As Wahlberg (2018) points out, it can therefore seem to be an example of "ecumenical incorrectness" to discuss fundamental differences between Catholics and Protestants: "ecumenical correctness and norms of scholarly detachment dictate that the theologian should be critical of his confession and tread softly when discussing others." Nevertheless, as Wahlberg notes, there are also clear benefits to also discussing differences in a "common, earnest quest for truths" that also allows for critique of confessional positions. Likewise, Stacey and McNabb's clever utilization of Reformed epistemology for a Catholic argument itself provides evidence of the benefits of ecumenical engagement between Christians. Ecumenism, too, is a social process that, for purposes of error correction, requires attention not only to commonalities, but also to continual differences. Both the theological concern of continuity with tradition and the concern for the authority of the Bible are valid, and dialogue can help find the proper balance and means for taking both into account.

Regardless of differences, in practice, it seems likely that most Protestants and Catholics believe in doctrines like the Trinity for similar reasons: They have been taught the doctrine as the right way of understanding the Bible by their local Christian communities, they have an understanding that the Trinity is part of the historic Christian faith, and they have some understanding of how the Trinity makes sense of central Biblical commitments such as the self-revelation and saving work of God in Jesus Christ.

Here, I have argued that when properly understood, the classical Protestant principle of sola scriptura does not require epistemic egoism, as relying only on the self or as the rejection of the importance of tradition and church community in interpreting scripture. However, instead of simple criteria of authority based on the part of the tradition infallibly guiding Christians, Protestant sensibilities fit better with understanding tradition as a "democracy of the dead", where the voice of each has epistemic weight, but some testimony might have more weight than others, due to factors like apostolicity and broad acceptance by informed Christians across space and time. This provides basis for an ecumenically inclusive theological epistemology, which allows for the primacy of Scripture required by sola scriptura, but also allows for the testimony of the Christian tradition, and Christian churches, to have an important role. But work remains to be done: A full model of religious epistemic authority should make room for not only the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but also, for example, the prospects and problems of considering valuable all the diverse human witness about God.

Acknowledgements

I thank Mats Wahlberg, Ida Heikkilä, and two anonymous reviewers for valuable feedback on this article.

Bibliography

Abraham, William J. 2002. *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/0199250030.001.0001.

Anatolios, Khaled. 2011. *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Anton, Emil. 2019. "The Catholic Trouble with Justification: Comments on Scott Hahn's Romans." *Theology* 122 (5): 355–62. https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X19858950

Anton, Emil. 2021. "Dealing with Inner-Church Conflict: The Story of a Soul on the Periphery." *ET Studies* 13 (1): 3–21. https://doi.org/10.2143/ETS.13.1.3290778

Arffman, Kaarlo. 1993. *Sanan jäljet: Kirkon historian merkitys Martti Lutherin teologiassa.* Helsinki: Suomalainen Teologinen Kirjallisuusseura.

Augustine, Aurelius. 1887. *On Christian Doctrine.* Translated by James Shaw. In *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. 2*, edited by Philip Schaff. Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co.

Baker-Hytch, Max. 2018. "Testimony Amidst Diversity." In *Knowledge, Belief, and God: New Insights in Religious Epistemology*, edited by M. A. Benton, J. Hawthorne & D. Rabinowitz, 183–202. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198798705.003.0010.

Behr, John. 2001. *The Way to Nicaea*. Cresswood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Bogardus, Thomas. 2013. "Disagreeing with the (Religious) Skeptic." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 74: 5–17. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-012-9342-9

Book of Concord. 1921. *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church. German-Latin-English.* Online version. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House. https://thebookofconcord.org/

Collins, Kenneth J. and Walls, Jerry L. 2017. *Roman but Not Catholic: What Remains at Stake 500 Years after the Reformation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Collins, Kenneth J. & Walls, Jerry L. 2018. "Roman Obstinacy." *First Things* 283 (May 2018). https://www.firstthings.com/article/2018/05/letters

Constantin, Jan, and Thomas Grundmann. 2020. "Epistemic Authority: Preemption through Source Sensitive Defeat." *Synthese* 197: 4109–30. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-018-01923-x

De Ridder, Jeroen. 2022. "How to Trust a Scientist." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 93: 11–20. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsa.2022.02.003.

Dulles, Avery. 1980. "Scripture: Recent Protestant and Catholic Views." *Theology Today* 37 (1): 7–25. https://doi.org/10.1177/004057368003700102

Feser, Edward. 2018. "The Church Permits Criticism of Popes under Certain Circumstances." Edward Feser's Blog, May 20, 2018. https://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2018/05/the-church-permits-criticism-of-popes_20.html . Accessed April 30, 2024.

Fitzmeyer, Joseph A. 2008. *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Gage, Logan Paul. 2019. "Review: Kenneth J. Collins and Jerry L. Walls. Roman but Not Catholic: What Remains at Stake 500 Years after the Reformation." *Journal of Analytic Theology* 7: 732–736. https://doi.org/10.12978/jat.2019-7.111413060004.

Graybill, Gregory. 2010. *Evangelical Free Will: Phillip Melanchton's Doctrinal Journey on the Origins of Faith*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gregory, Brad S. 2012. *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674062580.

Grundmann, Thomas. 2021. "Preemptive Authority: The Challenge from Outrageous Expert Judgments." *Episteme* 18: 407–27. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2021.30

Hahn, Scott W. 2017. *Romans*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Heikkilä, Ida. 2023. *Tradition as Testimony: The Meanings of Witness in German Evangelical-Catholic Dialogues from the 1980s to the 2020s*. ThD Dissertation. Helsinki: University of Helsinki. http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-51-8876-2

Henderson, David. 2020. "On the Background of Social Epistemology." In *The Routledge Handbook of Social Epistemology*, edited by Miranda Fricker, Peter J. Graham, David Henderson, and Nikolaj J. L. L. Pedersen, 3–9. London: Routledge

Holley, David M. 2013. "Religious Disagreement and Epistemic Rationality." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 74: 33–48. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-012-9366-1

Hoogeveen Suzanne, Sarafoglou Alexandra, Wagenmakers Eric-Jan. 2020. "Laypeople Can Predict Which Social-Science Studies Will Be Replicated Successfully." *Advances in Methods and Practices in Psychological Science* 3 (3): 267–285. https://doi.org/10.1177/251524592091966

Ioannides, John P. A. 2005. "Why Most Published Research Findings Are False." *PLoS Medicine*, 2(8): e1004085. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.0020124

Juntunen, Sammeli. 2004. "Mitä on sola scriptura periaate tänään?" *Raamattu ja kirkon usko tänään*, edited by Maarit Hytönen, 32–52. Tampere: Kirkon tutkimuskeskus.

Keener, Craig A. 2009. *Romans: A New Covenant Commentary*. Eugene: Cascade Books.

Kelly, Thomas. 2011. "Consensus Gentium: Reflections on the 'Common Consent' Argument for the Existence of God." In *Evidence and Religious Belief*, edited by Kelly J. Clark & Raymond J. VanArragon, 135–156. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199603718.003.0009.

Kilcrease, Jack D. 2023. "An Intended Reformulation: Of Brad Gregory, Duns Scotus, and Early Modern Metaphysics." In *Athens and Wittenberg: Poetry, Philosophy, and Luther's Legacy*, edited by James E. Kellerman, R. Alden Smith, and Carl P. E. Springer, 210–233. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004206717_017.

Kojonen, E. V. R. Forthcoming a. "On Sola Scriptura and Social Epistemology." Accepted for publication in *Studia Theologica: The Nordic Journal of Theology*.

Kojonen, E. V. R. Forthcoming b. "Trusting in Science and Religion: Parallels and Contrasts." Accepted for publication in *Agatheos: European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*.

Young, Richard Kim. Ed. 2020. The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lackey, Jennifer. 2018. "Experts and Peer Disagreement." In *Knowledge, Belief, and God: New Insights in Religious Epistemology*, edited by Matthew Benton, John Hawthorne, and Dani Rabinowitz, 228–245. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198798705.003.0012.

Lackey, Jennifer. 2021. "Preemption and the Problem of the Predatory Expert." *Philosophical Topics* 49 (2): 133–150. https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics202149219

Lutheran World Federation, 2020. *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification: 20th Anniversary Edition, Including Statements from the World Methodist Council, Anglican Consultative Council, Wolrd Communion of Reformed Churches*. Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation. http://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/joint_declaration_2019_en.pdf

Mannermaa, Tuomo. 2010. "Luther as a Reader of the Holy Scripture." In *Engaging Luther*, edited by Olli-Pekka Vainio, 223–31. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books.

Moss, R. 2015. "Beyond "Two Source Theory" and "Sola Scriptura": Ecumenical Perspectives on Scripture and Tradition." *Acta theologica* 35 (2): 66–81. http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/actat.v35i2.5

Mullins, Ryan. 2016. "Divine Temporality, the Trinity, and the Charge of Arianism." Journal of Analytic Theology, 4, 267–290. https://doi.org/10.12978/jat.2016-4.172413122018a

Neels, Gerrit. 2022. "Interpreting the Probabilities in Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism." *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 91: 163–75. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-021-09818-7

Newman, John Henry. 1909. *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine.* London: Longmans, Green, and Co.

Ortlund, Gavin. 2024. *What It Means to Be Protestant: The Case for an Always-Reforming Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Pelikan, Jaroslav. 1971. *Historical Theology: Continuity and Change in Christian Doctrine.* New York: Corpus.

Plantinga, Alvin. 2012. *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion and Naturalism.* New York: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199812097.001.0001.

Ratzinger, Joseph. 1969. "Origin and Background." In *Commentary on the documents of Vatican II, Vol. 3*, edited by H. Vorgrimler, 184–94. New York: Herder and Herder.

Raz, Joseph. *The Morality of Freedom*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988. https://doi.org/10.1093/0198248075.001.0001.

Saarinen, Risto. 2016. *Recognition and Religion: A Historical and Systematic Study.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198791966.001.0001.

Saarinen, Risto. 2017. "Luther and the Reading of Scripture." In *Remembering the Reformation: Martin Luther and Catholic Theology.* Ed. Declan Marimion, Salvador Ryan, Gesa E. Thiessen. 193–209. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Schreiner, Susan. 2011. *Are You Alone Wise? The Search for Certainty in the Early Modern Era.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Slagle, Jim. 2023. *The Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism: Context, Exposition, and Repercussions.* London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Stacey, Gregory; and McNabb, Tyler. 2024. "Sola Scriptura and the Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism." *TheoLogica.* Published Online First, March 26, 2024. https://doi.org/10.14428/thl.v9i1.79213

Vatican. 1964. "Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, Solemnly Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on November 21, 1964." Documents of the II Vatican Council. Available at https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html .

Vatican, 1994. "Common Christological Declaration of Pope John Paul II and His Holiness Mar Dinkha IV, Catholic-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East." Vatican Department of Communications, 11. November. Available at:

https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1994/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19941111_dichiarazione-cristologica.html.

Vainio, Olli-Pekka. 2010. *Beyond Fideism: Negotiable Religious Identities*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Vainio, Olli-Pekka. 2017. *Disagreeing Virtuously: Religious Conflict in Interdisciplinary Perspective.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Vainio, Olli-Pekka & Visala, Aku. Eds. 2023. *Theological Perspectives on Free Will: Compatibility, Christology, and Community.* London: Routledge.

Vanhoozer, Kevin. 2018. "Sola Scriptura Means Scripture First! A "Mere Protestant" Dogmatic Account (and Response)." In *Sola Scriptura: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Scripture, Authority, and Hermeneutics*, edited by Hans Burger, Arnold Huijgen and Eric Peels, 335–58. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004356436_020.

Visala, Aku, & Vainio, Olli-Pekka. 2020. "Erasmus versus Luther: A Contemporary Analysis of the Debate on Free Will." *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 62 (3): 311–35. https://doi.org/10.1515/nzsth-2020-0016.

Vähäsarja, Petri. 2012. "Perussanoma julkaisee paavin kirjan suomeksi." Seurakuntalainen.fi. 24.2.2012. https://www.seurakuntalainen.fi/uutiset/perussanoma-julkaisee-paavin-kirjan-suomeksi/ . Accessed on May 2, 2024.

Wahlberg, Mats. 2014. *Revelation as Testimony: A Philosophical-Theological Study*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Wahlberg, Mats. 2018a. "Ecumenical Incorrectness." *First Things*, 281 (March 2018). https://www.firstthings.com/article/2018/03/ecumenical-incorrectness

Wahlberg, Mats. 2018b. "Reply to Collins and Walls." *First Things*, 283 (May 2018). https://www.firstthings.com/article/2018/05/letters

Webster, John. 2004. "Biblical Theology and the Clarity of Scripture." In *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Craig Bartholomew, Mary Healy, Karl Möller, and Robin Parry, 352–284. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Wilken, Robert Louis. 2019. *Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom.* New Haven: Yale University Press. https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300245493.

Zagzebski, Linda. 2012. *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199936472.001.0001.

Published Online First: November 1, 2024