On Positive Mysterianism

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Abstract   Religious believers react in one of four ways to apparent contradictions among their beliefs: Redirection, Resistance, Restraint, or Resolution. This paper evaluates positive mysterian Resistance, the view that believers may rationally believe and know apparently contradictory religious doctrines. After locating this theory by comparing and contrasting it with others, I explore the best developed version of it, that of James Anderson's *Paradox in Christian Theology*. I argue that it faces steep epistemic problems, and is at best a temporarily reasonable but ultimately unsustainable stance.

I. Introduction: Locating Mysterianism

Mainstream (hereafter small "c" "catholic"[1]) Christian theology *seems* to assert several apparent contradictions, particularly in her Trinity and Incarnation doctrines. Her critics sometimes triumphantly seize on these appearances, declaring catholic theology to be riddled with inconsistency.
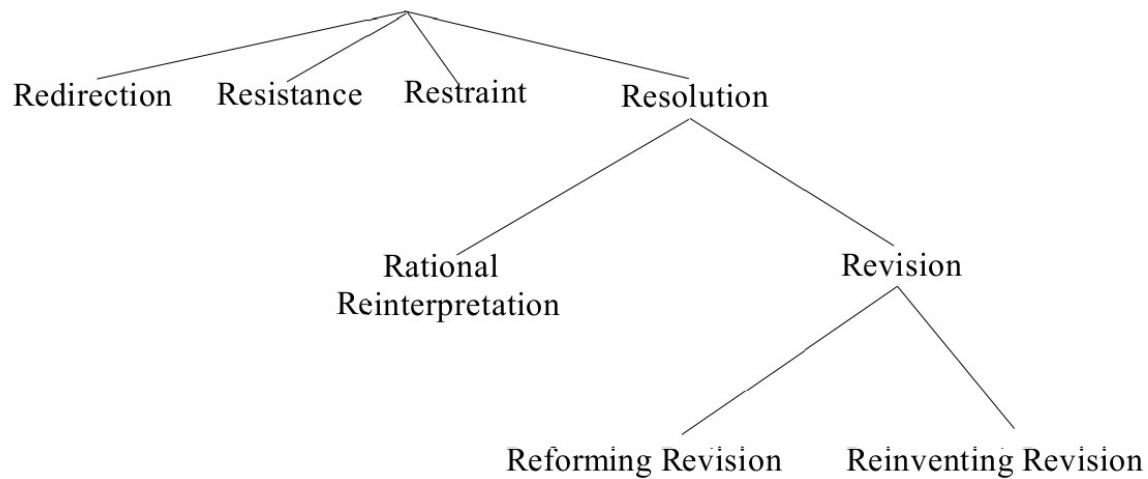
This is hasty; we must distinguish merely apparent from real contradictions. Fair enough. But we normally infer the real from the apparent. If it looks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it *probably* is a duck. Thus, there are logical tensions within catholic Christian theology. Sometimes, it endorses P and also, directly or indirectly *seems* committed to not-P.

I suggest there are only four general ways to respond to these tensions, which I shall call: Redirection, Resistance, Restraint, and Resolution.

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1 I have in mind the family of Christian theologies deriving from the "church fathers", the broad tradition which is shared by Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestants deriving from the Magisterial Reformation. In apologetics literature this sort of theology is often branded as "historic Christian orthodoxy".

Responses to Apparent Contradiction(s) in Christian Theology

Redirection   Resistance   Restraint   Resolution

Rational Reinterpretation   Revision

Reforming Revision   Reinventing Revision

The first of these we may quickly set aside. Redirection is the typical response of one who is in denial about the apparent contradictions, or who lacks the mental resources to process difficulties in her world view, or who has these but lacks intellectual integrity or courage. When the problem is raised, she changes the subject, redirecting the conversation to things in which she's interested. "P and not-P? Well, I say Q." I fear that this is a popular response, at least outside the realm of intellectuals, as it simply isn't in the interests of many people to acknowledge the presence of apparent contradictions within the theology to which they're committed. In this discussion I'm addressing people who are committed to rational reflection on their own religious beliefs.

The other three responses are more principled. Able and responsible thinkers squarely face the appearance of contradiction, and seek to deal with it. One way to deal with it is Restraint. Here, one notes the appearance of contradiction, and concludes that one simply doesn't know what is being asserted in the source at hand. The source seems to assert P, and Q, but it also seems true to the practitioner of Restraint that if P then not-Q. Neither willing to distrust the source, nor to believe an apparent contradiction, the Restrained believer shrugs his shoulders and admits that he doesn't know what the source is asserting. For example, he may realize that a certain way of understanding the doctrine of the Trinity seems inconsistent. The restrained theologian will decline to endorse that way of understanding the Trinity, or any other clear formulation. "Sure, *if* it meant X, then it would seem contradictory… but maybe it doesn't mean X." Of course, he'll say he's committed to the truth of *whatever it is* that's supposed to be expressed by the traditional statements of the doctrine, and he doesn't rule out that others who are holier, smarter, or more informed *have* understood it.

Restraint is a way of stalling. Stalling is often reasonable; no one has time to look into every difficulty, and we have a lot more to do than develop our theological thinking. The Restrained believer is saying that he believes, hopes, or is somehow committed to certain sentences expressing truth, but isn't aware of what that truth is. Fair enough. One should be

spurred on, though, by three concerns. First, some people have claimed to have discerned various important truths in those sentences. So, one should seek to find the same. Second, the sentences in question could be fool's gold; it could be that they really express only falsehoods. One needs to rule this out, to avoid forming false beliefs about important matters. Third, maybe the sentences express nothing - maybe they are unintelligible. If so, whatever their value, they won't be a means of believing, thinking, or expressing truths. Again, this needs to be ruled out. Thus while Restraint is initially an expression of intellectual humility (one doesn't just jump to dismiss a doctrine at the first sign of a problem), eventually it hardens into an irresponsible stance.

If we decline Redirection and Restraint, we must choose between Resistance and Resolution. Should the logical pressure, as it were, be withstood, perhaps explained, and accommodated (Resistance), or should it be as it were released, so that the difficulty is resolved by reflections showing the apparent contradiction to be only apparent? (Resolution)

The Resolution camp divides into two factions: Rational Reinterpretation and Revision. With the current renaissance of metaphysical inquiry, a kind of Rational Reinterpretation has become extremely popular among Christian philosophers.[2] The basic line of response is: "Sure, you might *think* catholicism is caught in a contradiction. But we ought to interpret these Authorities charitably. We ought to interpret them as saying Q, and Q pretty clearly *is* consistent."

This response is in theory reasonable, but in practice difficulties arise. First, Q often turns out to be something which only a philosophically trained person can understand. Thus, it is not clear that Q could even be believed by most of the faithful, whether now or in the past. Further, was Q really discovered and believed by various fourth century bishops, and by the faithful ever since? It is usually unclear how new-fangled Q relates to the doctrines of the historical catholic Authorities.[3] Are we to read them as asserting Q? Or as implicitly committed to Q? Or is Q just some truth we should think they were groping their way towards, though Q never entered their minds? Or may we cast aside the intentions of those Authorities, and freely impose on their words the most plausible interpretation we can come up with?

The Papacy has denounced this sort of move; Roman Catholic catholics should note the threat of Vatican I:

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2 There are other kinds of Resolution, which are based on alleged insights from logic, philosophy of language, or philosophy of science. I'll only discuss metaphysics-inspired Rational Reinterpretation here, for two reasons. First, they are currently much less popular among Christian philosophers. Second, I think that Anderson effectively shows that these solutions – what he calls theological anti-realism, anti-deductivism, semantic minimalism, and complementarity - are unworkable (2007, pp. 111-7, 131-52). Moreover, it seems to me that they've always been at best tiny minority positions among Christians, and they're doomed to always be. So I set them aside as being of less interest.

     Another form of Resistance would be to hold dialetheism, the view that some contradictions are true (and also false), and that these include the Christian doctrines in question. Anderson argues rather quickly that this theory can be of no help to Christianity, whether or not it can be refuted on philosophical grounds (2007, 123-6). I think no one has properly explored how dialetheism might be employed to defend Christian doctrines, and like many philosophers, although I'm not sure how to refute dialetheism, I believe it to be false, and I shall assume its falsity here. Hence, I shall assume that evidence of inconsistency is always evidence of falsehood.

3 E.g. depending on one's preferred version of catholic Christianity, the Councils of Trent, or Chalcedon, or Constantinople, the "Athanasian" Creed, and so on.

If anyone says that it is possible that at some time, given the advancement of knowledge, a sense may be assigned to the dogmas propounded by the church which is different from that which the church has understood and understands: let him be anathema.[4]

This threat is squarely aimed at theological projects of Resolution through Rational Reconstruction. Even the most biblicist Protestant should be worried. How could Q be part of the "faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints"?[5]

Sometimes all a would-be apologist means to claim is that "It is *logically possible that* the Authorities' words mean Q, and there's a possible world in which Q is true, hence the Authorities' words don't *necessarily* express a contradiction" - a conclusion much weaker and less interesting than what I called the basic line of response just above. Even this, though, conflicts with Vatican I, as it presupposes that there is *not* a single, time-invariant, and rather easily knowable (via the testimony of the tradition) meaning of the words in question. For if there is such a meaning, exercises about what it is logically possible for the words to mean are pointless.

Tradition-minded thinking Christians are divided in their response to Rational Reinterpretation. Some of those smart enough to understand the new-fangled Q find it exciting and plausible. Others reply, "Not so fast. The Authorities weren't saying *that.* A good historical understanding of the intellectual milieu which produced the doctrine in question reveals that Q never did or could have occurred to any of the people therein.*"*

The Revision camp agrees – the Authorities *weren't* saying that. They really were saying something inconsistent, just as it appears. Better to revise our theology. But according to what standard? The Revision camp divides into those primarily biblically-motivated and those primarily motivated by extra-biblical concerns – we can call them Reforming Revisers and Reinventing Revisers. The former say, "Those Authorities were blinded by tradition, party-spirit, or other non-rational factors. Happily, the Bible (contrary to their claims) clearly teaches not-P, but gives at best scant support to P. Thus the way forward is to deny the beloved and hoary P." These Reforming Revisers are generally aware that they're relying not on the Bible alone, but on the Bible interpreted according to logic, reason, and common sense. Some Reformers are what we can call doctrinal-minimalists, and some are not. A doctrinal minimalist thinks that an important error of catholicism has been holding up detailed theoretical speculations as required beliefs, whereas the beliefs required by Jesus and the apostles were few, simple and understandable, not requiring any unusual intellectual sophistication. The non-minimalist Reformer puts forth a fairly detailed alternative to traditional catholic theology.

In contrast, Reinventing Revisers hold that theology is something which must be (in a radical sense) renewed in each age; in light of certain great discoveries in fields outside (but sometimes closely related to) systematic theology, our commitments must be rethought at a basic level. The Bible was a product of its age, an age we have left behind, and we must not be constrained by this fallible and dated collection of documents in our search for truth.

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4 First Vatican Council, Canon 4, section 3, in Tanner (1990, p. 811). Compare with "Dogmatic constitution on the catholic faith", ch. 4 "On faith and reason", in Tanner (1990, pp. 808-9).

5 Jude 3 (NIV).

Unlike Redirectors, but like Revisers and Resolvers, Resisters acknowledge and try to face apparent contradictions. But rather than showing these to be merely apparent and not real, Resisters believe that the reasonable response is to learn to live with them. We may compare apparent contradictions to undocumented immigrants. Revisers and Resolvers want to deport them all, while Resisters are in favor of a wide (but not universal) amnesty. In this paper I explore and object to what I call mysterian Resistance, which is based on the idea that doctrines such as the Trinity and Incarnation ought to be embraced as "mysteries" - reasonably believed doctrines whose content in some sense eludes us.

II. Mysterianism defined: Negative and Positive

"Mysterianism" is an ugly but necessary neologism.[6] A mysterian about a doctrine D holds that D to some degree lacks understandable content. "Understandable content" here means propositional content which the hearer "grasps" or understands, and which seems to her to be consistent. A mysterian is by definition *not* someone who carelessly dismisses theoretical problems by dubbing them "holy mysteries", or a mystery-monger with a perverse love of inconsistency or paradoxical language. A mysterian is epistemologically sophisticated, and thus takes up a meta-position about D, that any *acceptable* version of D, at least given our present epistemic limitations, will involve language lacking understandable content.

Mysterianism comes in negative and positive versions. The negative mysterian holds that D is not understandable because it is too poor in intelligible content for it to positively seem consistent (or not) to us. There is a *prima facie* contradiction in D, but given proper tutoring, this as it were recedes into darkness. The positive mysterian holds that D can't be understood because of an abundance of content. That is D *seems* to contain at least one explicit or implicit contradiction. So while we grasp the meaning of its individual claims, taken together they seem inconsistent, and so in the sense explained above, the conjunction of them is not understandable. The positive mysterian usually holds that the human mind is adequate to understand many truths about God, although it breaks down at a certain stage, when the most profound divinely revealed truths are entertained.

Positive mysterianism has a firm foothold among recent Protestant theologians.[7] To my knowledge, only one thinker versed in recent analytic philosophical theology has explored it in detail, and we'll examine his work at length below. I have found mostly negative mysterianism among the catholic church fathers and the medieval traditions beholden to them. I must here set aside negative mysterianism, so as to evaluate the currently more popular gambit of positive mysterianism, as performed by its most sophisticated proponent.

III. Anderson's Positive Mysterianism

Philosophical theologian James Anderson had developed what I believe to be the most epistemologically sophisticated version of positive mysterian Resistance to date.[8] Like the Revisers, and unlike the Redirectors, he faces up to the apparent contradictions, admitting that they are *prima facie* a problem for catholicism. The solution? Learn to tolerate them, maybe even

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6 As far as I know, I am to blame for inflicting this new term of art on philosophical theology, in Tuggy (2009a) and Tuggy (2009b).
7 For examples of this theme in recent evangelical theologians, see Basinger (1987).
8 Anderson (2007).

like them, while holding that they *must* (though no one presently knows how) be merely apparent. That is, they really (but imperfectly) express truths, and as all truths are consistent, so are the contents of these doctrines.

This looks like a tough row to hoe. Why does Anderson choose it? In short, the other alternatives theologically unacceptable. Being within the Reformed or Calvinist camp of Protestant Christianity, it is perhaps surprising how very conservative, how not only catholic, but how near-Catholic, Anderson's stance turns out to be. I believe it is widely shared, though, particularly in the realm of theologically educated, non-theologically-liberal Christians, and above all by those serving as apologists for catholic Christianity. The stance, usually more assumed than stated, is something like this:

The Bible, though it deals with profundities, is reasonably *clear. The Fathers, as a group, generally got it right, as did the Ecumenical Councils. These ancient Authorities are at least for the most part revealing and clarifying the implicit contents of the Bible, not adding things to it and/or leaving out anything important therein. Their documents are our precious heritage – particularly the Constantinopolitan ("Nicene") Creed, the so-called Athanasian Creed, and the definitions of the council of Chalcedon. These define Christian orthodoxy (catholicism) by systematically and theoretically expressing what the Bible centrally teaches, and to deny them is to deny the Bible itself, which is to deny the authority of Jesus, his apostles, and ultimately God who sent them.*

The other options sacrifice catholic orthodoxy on the altar of consistency. Rational Reinterpreters claim to be "interpreting" the aforementioned Creeds, but they are simply imposing their own clever ideas on top of them – ideas their writers never entertained, and for which catholicism has never stood. Our ancient forebears, not corrupted by Enlightenment values, were less concerned with removing apparent inconsistencies. This intellectual game tends towards heterodox theology. As to the Revisers – how can we think that God would let the mainstream of his true Church go astray on such weighty matters for so long, only to be corrected in these latter days by some sophisticates who think they can see what all the church fathers, councils of bishops, and so many great later catholic theologians missed? And in any case, when you look at the actual content of their doctrine, they're burning the house down, not patching it up. In sum, the root of both these errors is Rationalism: the inability to tolerate any appearance of contradiction in one's theology, making something akin to an idol out of manifest theoretical consistency.

While the above stance is often assumed rather than stated, to his credit, Anderson in various places expresses all of the above. This is part of his genius – clearly putting on the table assumptions which normally work in the background.

Anderson cogently objects to several attempts at Rational Reinterpretation of the catholic Trinity and Incarnation doctrines, including some of the metaphysics-inspired ones which have so proliferated lately.[9] I have some sympathy for his view that all or many of these offered solutions are so much misapplied cleverness, as they either fail to deal in a principled way with the Authorities they claim to be *in some sense* agreeing with, or are implausible, for philosophical, theological, or biblical reasons. Another worry is that the offered solutions are

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9   Anderson (2007, pp. 31-54, 80-106, 111-4, 131-52).

useless to the wider Christian community, involving as they do hard-to-grasp metaphysical subtleties.

Anderson holds that the faithful Christian is faced with a dilemma: either positive mysterianism or heterodoxy (i.e. non-catholic beliefs).

> We are thus faced with a stark choice: on the one hand, to conform the phenomena of divine revelation to our human intuitions about what must be the case, or on the other, to conform these human intuitions to the phenomena of divine revelation. Just as Abraham trusted God's self-revelation in the facing of seeming absurdity – the pregnancy of a pensioner and the sacrifice of a son – and was commended for his faith, so it is possible that God means us [to] trust the self-revelation of his triunity and his incarnation in the face of seeming illogicality, as opposed to leaning on our own understanding.[10]

Anderson argues that his positive mysterian Resistance is in a sense *reasonable*, in fact, the most reasonable option for Christians to take, and he has a well-developed family of positive views designed to make good on that claim.

Anderson develops Alvin Plantinga's epistemology so that beliefs in mysteries (merely apparent contradictions) may be rational, warranted, justified, and known. Proper catholic belief about the Trinity and the Incarnation, Anderson holds, involves one in believing implicitly, for example, that Jesus is identical to God, and so is his Father, even though Jesus and the Father are not themselves identical, that the Son is omniscient and limited in knowledge, and that there's exactly one divine person, yet there is more than one divine person.[11] These, he grants, are *apparent* contradictions, but for the believer they are strongly warranted nonetheless. How so?

Recall that for Plantinga, "warrant" is that quality, enough of which is required for a true belief to count as knowledge. A warranted belief is, roughly, one which was produced by a well-designed, properly functioning and truth-aimed belief forming faculty, operating in an environment sufficiently like the sort for which it was designed. The degree of warrant a belief enjoys varies with how strongly it is held, so to be very warranted, a belief must be very firmly believed, and a belief which is but tentatively believed will lack enough warrant to be known. Plantinga famously holds that it is warrant, and not justification, evidence, rationality, or doing one's epistemic duty, which is necessary (and sufficient) for a true belief to be known – whether we're talking about knowledge gained through memory, reasoning, or perception. Further, if theism is true, it is plausible to think that humans have a *sensus divinitatis* – a faculty of forming true beliefs about our creator, triggered by various common circumstances, and yielding fairly widespread knowledge of God's existence. Further, if Christianity is true, Plantinga argues, it is plausible that God would equip us to know the truth of the main claims of Christianity. Thus Plantinga develops what he calls his "extended Aquinas-Calvin model" - a theory about how, if Christianity is true, it could be that Christians know what Plantinga calls "the great things of the gospel" - basically, the Christian diagnosis of what is wrong with the human race, and its proposed cure for that problem.[12]

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10 Anderson (2007, p. 283).
11 Anderson (2007, pp. 28-30, 226, 241 fn. 45, 268-71, 280, 305-6).
12 For Alvin Plantinga's theory of knowledge, see Plantinga (2000, part III) or Anderson's apt summary

About the Trinity and Incarnation, Plantinga is either a Resolver through Rational Reinterpretation or a Reviser.[13] And as Anderson shows, there is some unclarity in the precise roles played by the Bible and by the Holy Spirit in Plantinga's extended Aquinas-Calvin model. Further, Plantinga's model deals only with the explicit doctrines of the Bible, and not with claims of systematic theology.[14] Anderson aims to resolve these ambiguities, giving a revised model according to which propositions of catholic theology may be warranted and known, and pouring a foundation for his positive mysterianism. For the rest of this section I shall illustrate Anderson's development of the extended Aquinas-Calvin model through a concrete example.[15]

Upon repeatedly and thoughtfully reading the Bible, catholic Cathy forms, with the supernatural aid of the Holy Spirit, the firm belief that God is the ultimate and primary author of the Bible. This belief, according to Plantingian epistemology, is warranted and known by her. Carefully studying her Bible, she comes to hold that it teaches E: Jesus knows everything, and N: that there are some matters of which he's ignorant. The former belief seems implicit in the book, all things considered, while the latter belief is explicitly stated.[16] Trusting the Bible, she herself firmly believes both E and N. This whole belief formation process is according to the design plan, and involves the operation of her faculty of testimony-acceptance, and the supernatural agency of the Holy Spirit, whose gracious action is necessary for this process. These beliefs are confirmed by the testimony of her friend Fred, a theology professor, and moreover by a historical train of theologians from the catholic denomination to which both Cathy and Fred belong, going back hundreds of years – these both profess belief in E and N and confirm that the Bible teaches E and N.[17]

But Cathy is intelligent and thoughtful, and along with E and N, something else seems true to her: C: E and N are inconsistent, and so cannot both be true. She gains this intuition by reflecting on the content of E and N: if Jesus knows *everything*, then how can it be that there's some fact of which he's ignorant? E and N *seem* to affirm and deny the same thing, namely, that Jesus is omniscient.

This intuition – this fact that C seems true to Cathy – *doesn't*, however, blossom into a

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of it (2007, pp. 155-216).

13 It is likely that he intends to be a Resolver, but he is *arguably* a Reviser, depending on exactly exactly one sets the boundaries of catholic belief. For his tentative and somewhat undeveloped views on these, see Plantinga (1999; 2000, pp. 319-20). In short, he seems to endorse the social trinitarianism of his brother Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. Yet he habitually considers God to be a person, not a group of persons. (e.g. 2000, p. 204) On the Incarnation, he denies the Athanasian claim that there's a suffering subject and a non-suffering subject in Christ. In his view, there's only one person here, Christ, and the dual "natures" Christ enjoys are not particular things which are his parts and can have personal properties such as knowing, acting, or suffering, but are rather abstract properties, universals which inhere in Christ.

14 Anderson (2007, pp. 177-91) Compare with Plantinga (2000, pp. 241-89).

15 The following story is meant to distill the claims in Anderson (2007, chapter 6).

16 Mark 13:32.

17 As an anonymous referee points out, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians may prefer a story where the confirming authority is not a professor, but instead one or more religious leaders – such as a Pope, the early church fathers, one's bishop, etc. Being a Reformed theologian committed to *sola scriptura*, Anderson would leave the story as is – for him the relevant authorities are just genuine experts on the Bible - but he means to offer a model flexible enough for any non-theologically-liberal catholic to adapt and use. See Anderson (2007, pp. 189-99, esp. pp. 189-90).

belief that C. If it did, Cathy would have what epistemologists call a defeater for her belief in the conjunction of E and N – a further belief such that if she has it, it would be irrational for her to continue believing both E and N. Her belief in E and N is protected from defeat by two factors. First, E and N enjoy a high degree of warrant. This entails that she believes them very firmly, and this is because they strongly seem true to her. As she's firmly convinced that both are true, she's firmly convinced that E and N must be consistent after all. The intuition in favor of C, then, is not to be trusted; she believes that E and N are only apparently, and not really inconsistent. And it is no surprise, Cathy reflects, that she should run into apparent contradictions in thinking about God, for God is incomprehensible – something which can't, given our present epistemic situation, be fully understood.

Cathy realizes that E and N must be a MACRUE – a merely apparent contradiction resulting from an unarticulated equivocation. E and N together say, as best she can understand them, that Jesus is all-knowing, and that Jesus is not all-knowing. One of the terms – either "Jesus", "is", or "all-knowing" must in fact be equivocal, though she doesn't have a belief about which is the culprit, or how it would be disambiguated. It would be unduly proud – rationalistic – if she were to make too much of it seeming to her that C; that she has this misleading intuition is merely a reflection of the inadequacy of her creaturely intellect. The proper course for her is to trust divine revelation (holding firm to E and N), while distrusting the deliverances of human reason (it seeming to her that C is true). Finally, she's aware that some clever catholic philosophers and theologians have interpreted the Bible and/or the authoritative creeds such that the conjunction of E and N seems consistent after all. But she eschews this sort of Rational Reinterpretation, as departing both from the tradition and from the obvious sense of the Bible. These would-be friends, as much as outright enemies of catholicism, trust too much in human reason. Cathy takes a more humble and reasonable course, that of positive mysterianism.

IV. Problems with Anderson's positive mysterianism

There are several difficulties with Anderson's mysterian defense of belief in apparent contradictions. First, his doctrine of incomprehensibility is trivial, and its relevance to mysterianism isn't obvious. A thing is "incomprehensible" just in case, (at least in our present condition) we can't know all there is to know about it.[18] God is indeed incomprehensible, but this isn't an interesting or controversial thesis. Theists have always universally held that God is incomprehensible in this sense. As Anderson points out, knowing all there is to know about God entails knowing everything he knows, which is everything. As all theists admit their own non-omniscience, they are all, trivially, committed to divine incomprehensibility.

But the thesis is trivial in another way. Maybe a complete and perfect physics is unattainable in this life by the human race. If so, then a humble mouse may also be incomprehensible, along with billions of other physical entities. But then, this allegedly important doctrine does nothing to separate God from a great many of the things he's made, and it gives us no reason why we should expect and be content with apparent contradictions is theology, and not in mousology.

One might think: Surely, God is *much more* incomprehensible than a humble mouse, in that in God's case, there are many more truths about him that we don't understand. This is plausible. But it does not follow that contradictions are more to be expected in theology than in

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18 Anderson (2007, pp. 237-8).

mousology. The occurrence of MACRUEs is not simply a function of how much the object surpasses our ability to comprehend it. There is another factor, which is how much epistemic access we have to the incomprehensible object. In the case of our omnipotent creator, this factor is entirely under his control.

Consider an unusual set of parents. Mr. and Mrs. Confusem are against hiding things from children; they're grown hippies who want their offspring to grow up free of arbitrary constraints. They have a three year old, Ima Confusem. When they do their taxes, or discuss credit card debt, they make sure Ima is right in the middle of it. "They're stealing our money, but we must give it to them," she thinks. Sex? Ima gets a chair by the bed. "Daddy's hurting Mommy, but he's not," thinks little Ima.

Most parents, happily, are not like the Confusems. Why not? Part of the reason is that there's no good purpose in more than momentarily confusing the little tyke. Ima receives no net benefit from this, and neither the conflicting intuitions nor the inconsistent beliefs they give rise to are helpful to her. Now is God more like the Confusems, or like ordinary parents? My money would be on the latter. God, being omniscient, would know precisely how much he could reveal about himself without inducing persistent MACRUEs in us. On the face of it, it would not serve any good purpose for him to deliberately confuse us; better to dole out bits of information about him which we *can* understand, and which can therefore guide our decision-making.

Still, this is not obvious. Anderson suggests some possible motives God might have to inflict MACRUEs on us. First, that the Trinity and Incarnation doctrines appear contradictory to us has gained them more "intellectual attention and critical reflection" that they otherwise would have had.[19] Second, that a religion's doctrines exhibit MACRUEs are a "mark of transcendent origin", by which we pick out truly revealed religions from those of "mere human invention".[20] Third, our being subject to MACRUEs concerning God "fosters reverent awe". Fourth, it would foster our "epistemic humility".[21] Fifth, "paradox... invites *faith*, requiring us to trust God's self-revelation despite the fact that it disaccords at points with our rational intuitions...".[22]

In response, for all we know an omnipotent and omniscient being could achieve all the above aims without putting us in an epistemic situation in which our thinking about God unavoidably induces persistent apparent contradictions. Not only can we not rule this out, but it positively seems possible, as it seems that all the goals can be achieved by other means. Second, it is not clear that given God's other aims, or given actual conditions, the strategy suggested would make sense. Consider Anderson's first suggestion. That the Trinity and Incarnation doctrines seem inconsistent certainly has gained them attention. But not all attention is good attention; thinkers unsympathetic to Christianity nearly always dismiss such doctrines as obviously false. Why not, if you're God, draw people into to considering an important matter with only surface, temporary, resolvable apparent inconsistency? This would draw in the puzzle seekers without giving the unsympathetic strong reason to think it's all in the category of square circles. This is precisely what *negative* mysterians about the Trinity and/or Incarnation think God has done. But this route is not open to the positive mysterian, who by definition posits persisting, irresolvable apparent contradictions.

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19 Anderson (2007, p. 311).
20 Anderson (2007, p. 312).
21 Anderson (2007, p. 282).
22 Anderson (2007, p. 283, original emphasis).

Anderson's second suggestion falsely assumes that most religions other than Christianity are free of apparent contradictions. I suggest a look at Shankara's Hindu theology, Nagarjuna's brand of Buddhism, or Hegel's philosophical quasi-religion.[23] Humans thirst for apparent contradictions for multiple reasons; one may be looking for a puzzle to solve, for wares to sell as a revealer of obscure profundities, for evidence that one has reached the far limits of human knowledge, for evidence of the weakness of the human mind, or for the distinctive pleasure of an exhausted mind.[24] Thus, neither observation nor human nature give us reason to expect apparent contradictions to be rare in religions which are of merely human origin.

As to his fifth suggestion, I fear that Anderson has fallen into the common mistake of thinking that the virtue of faith is or requires believing without sufficient evidence, or against the preponderance of evidence. I think this is not the biblical conception of faith, but I cannot argue the point here.[25]

I conclude that even though there are many conceivable reasons why God might inflict MACRUEs on us, on the whole, the prior probability of God inducing MACRUEs in us is either low or inscrutable.[26] I've just given the case for inscrutability. But I also think it is arguable that the probability is low, given that we should assume that God's aims in revealing truths to us include enabling us to believe important truths, which can then guide our actions and further belief-formation.

One point, then, is that the appearance of MACRUEs doesn't follow from the fact of divine incomprehensibility.[27] Further, it doesn't even follow that their appearance is likely, as Anderson several times seems to say.[28] Therefore, it is a *non sequitur* to reason as follows: God is incomprehensible, therefore in thinking about him we'll run into MACRUEs. Or: God is incomprehensible, therefore in thinking about him we'll *probably* run into MACRUEs.

In correspondence, Anderson has replied that he doesn't need either of the above inferences. Rather, the doctrine of Incomprehensibility may serve as the best explanation of an apparent contradiction we've encountered.[29] I would phrase this point in terms of appearances or seemings.[30] It seems to catholic Cathy (1) that the Bible is inspired, and (2) that it teaches E and

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23 For expositions of Hegel and Nagarjuna, see Priest (2002, chapters 7 and 16). On Shankara, see Koller (2007, pp. 146-53).

24 On this last, see Tuggy (2003, p. 178).

25 On biblical faith, see Willard (2009, pp. 19-23) and Plantinga (2000, pp. 263-6).

26 I emphasize, *prior* probability. Many theologians are confident that God in fact inflicts MACRUEs on us because they believe he inspired the Bible, and it simply *does* inflict MACRUEs when carefully read. In my view, apparent contradictions are a high *prima facie* barrier to biblical interpretations which entail them, and many theologians have failed to consider a broad range of competing apparently consistent readings. I say more about this below.

27 Anderson (2007, p. 263).

28 Anderson (2007, pp. 241, 252, 253, 261, 263).

29 Email to the author, July 17, 2007.

30 Seemings are a type of cognitive experience. As I understand them, if it seems to one that P, this entails that one is at that time somewhat inclined to believe that P. (The reverse entailment does not hold; one may be inclined to believe that P even when one does not experience a seeming that P.) There are both sense-perceptual and other kinds of seemings. For example, when viewing a standard optical illusion, it visually seems that the lines are bent. But after one understands how the illusion works, and measures the lines, it more strongly seems, via memory, that the lines are not bent. Some philosophers hold that seemings don't entail, but typically cause and explain some of our inclinations

N, thus it seems to her (3) that both E and N are true. It also seems to her (4) that C, that it is impossible for both to be true. What's she to do? Anderson is suggesting, reasonably, that she needn't try to derive the actuality or probability of this intellectual impasse from the doctrine of incomprehensibility. Rather, she may realize that the thesis of incomprehensibility is the best explanation of this impasse, that is, this set of four seemings, not all of which may be veridical. According to this best explanation, there's an unarticulated equivocation somewhere in E or N, without which C would cease to seem true.

This is certainly *an* explanation, and it is an improvement over how he argues in his book. He leaps too quickly, though, to the claim that it is *the best* explanation. Supposing that each of the four intuitions above led to a belief being formed – the resulting set would be an inconsistent tetrad. Were this to happen, Anderson would argue that belief in C should go. Let's set aside the response of denying the authority of the Bible. Why not keep C, and deny that the Bible teaches both E and N? After all, as best we can tell, the form of E and N is P and not-P. If that's so, then E and N are incompatible. Thus, a competing hypothesis is that the Bible doesn't really teach both E and N. Given the history of catholic exegesis, this ought to worry us a great deal; it is all too common for tradition-minded Christians to simply read their later doctrines into earlier texts, to insert into these ancient texts, so to speak, claims which are in fact neither explicitly nor implicitly taught there, and which in fact do not best explain the content which *is* there. Before attention is given to this hypothesis – that the apparent contradiction is due to our own commitment-distorted textual interpretation – it will not be clear that Anderson's suggestion is anywhere close to the best explanation of those four intuitions.[31]

Another difficulty is this: normally, in interpreting both speakers and texts, we avoid attributing apparently contradictory claims to them – we properly regard this as a sort of last resort. The more we're convinced of the coherence of the speaker or text, the more likely we are to resort to a shoulder-shrugging "I just don't know *what* she means" before we declare her to have contradicted herself. When the Biblical interpreter, then, comes to the text with an assumption that it is divinely inspired, and is thus inerrant (or at least very reliable, or very reliable on theological matters), she ought to think very carefully about attributing an apparent contradiction to it, even if her denomination and wider catholicism insist that some apparent contradiction is *obviously* what is being said. I believe that in the cases of the Trinity and the Incarnation, ultimately unreasonably loyalty to catholic traditions of biblical interpretation are playing a key role in Anderson's thinking, but this point is beyond the scope of this paper.[32] I

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to believe. On this, and various analyses of seemings, see Cullison (forthcoming).

31 Anderson assumes, like others in his Reformed branch of catholic Christianity, that at least the early "ecumenical" councils, in Calvin's words, "contain nothing but the pure and genuine exposition of Scripture." (Anderson 2007, p. 200) Hence, in Anderson's view any "*doctrinal revisionism* sacrifices orthodoxy on the altar of received rationality." (2007, p. 262, original italics) In my view, this appraisal of the early councils can't withstand a close investigation of the facts, and Anderson is badly mistaken in overlooking the primary engine driving Christian dissent from catholic doctrine, especially from the fourth to the mid nineteenth centuries, which has been not any form of epistemic dogmatism, but rather biblical exegesis. On this, see my discussions cited in the following footnote.

32 I have in mind his over-quick argument that the Bible implies an apparently inconsistent Trinity doctrine. (Anderson 2007, pp. 267-71) This sort of case, familiar from many works of Christian apologetics, can only be wholly unconvincing to one acquainted with how well-motivated competing consistent schemes are. Like most contemporary theologians, Anderson seems almost wholly unaware

shall now argue that his mysterianism succumbs to difficulties which are *almost* purely epistemological.

Anderson follows Plantinga in thinking of the issue of "defeaters" primarily in terms of beliefs. In this way of thinking about defeaters, some original belief is being attacked, as it were, by a hostile newcomer. The original belief may be permanently defeated by the newcomer, or it may be initially defeated but restored by the arrived of yet further some further new belief (a defeater-defeater), or it may survive defeat by the attackers, by being "insulated" against defeat by some other (to mix metaphors) immunity-providing belief. Thus, Cathy believes E and N, and along comes this new belief: S: that C seems true (that is, E and N seem inconsistent). This is a belief about an aspect of her experience, about an intuition she has that something (C) is so. But Cathy stands firm in believing E and N, because she also has belief I, the thesis of divine incomprehensibility.

But defeaters needn't be beliefs. In my view, seemings may be defeaters. Consider an ancient skeptic, Larry. Seeking peace of mind, Larry resolves not to form beliefs. He does "assent to" appearances – that is, he mentally and practically goes along with how things seem to him, but he always refrains from forming beliefs. Larry looks at the table before him and seems to see an apple. He hereby acquires a defeater for the belief (were he to form it) that no apple has ever been on that table. This is clear, because if Larry lapses in his skepticism, and forms that belief (say, on the basis of testimony) that no apple has ever been on that table, it will immediately be defeated by the fact that it seemed (and so now through a clear memory, seems) to him that there *was* an apple on that table.

This shows that the whole metaphor of attacking and defending beliefs is limiting. The fact that it seems to Larry that there was an apple on the table defeats his belief that there never was an apple on the table. Why not the other way around? Because seemings or intuitions come in degrees of strength – Larry has a strong and clear memory of the apple being on that table, and so it strongly seems to him that this was so. But it also seems to him, based on testimony he accepts, that the table has always been apple-free. But this seeming is less strong. (Of course, one can imagine cases where the testimony-seeming outweighs the memory-seeming, in which the reasonable course would be for Larry to trust the testimony and doubt his memory, now that he's done with that silly skeptical stance.)

I suggest that we should analyze defeat scenarios as involving conflicting seemings, even when we're thinking of defeater and defeatee as both beliefs. Take the now well-worn example of the trip to the farm, where you seem to see a cow one hundred meters away. You quickly form a warranted and reasonable belief that there's a cow over there. But then a local informs you that the farmers in those parts are in the habit of putting up fake wooden cows in their fields, to give an exaggerated appearance of prosperity. When you believe what he tells you, this new belief is an undercutting defeater for your belief that that's a cow over there – one which renders it unreasonable for you to continue in that belief, as the basis for your belief has been undermined. Now, another local happens by, and tells you that this particular field belongs to Smith, and that he saw Smith sell off all his cows last week, and put up a fake one in the precise spot where you now seem to see one. These new beliefs give you a rebutting defeater, which makes it not only unreasonable to continue to believe there's a cow over there, but also renders it reasonable to

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of these. On these schemes, see Tuggy (2009b), especially the supplementary documents on unitarianism and history of Trinity doctrines.

believe that there is *not* a cow over there. But what is doing the defeating here is more fundamentally the seemings. The two strangers, by their testimony, twice change how things seem to you. It is because of how things seem to you that you change your beliefs. But even if you were uncommonly cautious in forming your beliefs, this change of seemings would provide you, successively, with an undercutting and with a rebutting defeater. They do that by in the first case canceling out, and in the second case outweighing the seeming that there's a cow over there. The undercutting defeater reduces how much it seems to you that there's a cow over there, to the point where it wouldn't be reasonable for you to believe it.[33] And the rebutting defeater makes it seem more strongly to you that not-O (It's not the case that there's a cow over there) than it seems to you that O (There's a cow over there).

The first thing wrong with Anderson's theory, then, is that Cathy's not believing C doesn't save her from having a defeater for her belief in E and N. But Anderson can grant this, allowing that defeaters may be aspects of an epistemic agent's experience, and not only beliefs. But now that we're clear that it's clashing seemings which are fundamentally the issue, we can see, I now argue, that his mysterian stance, while it may be reasonable for some people at some times, is unstable or fragile, in that new information rather easily knocks one out of one's reasonable belief in an apparent contradiction. While I'm not trying to convict Anderson of irrationality, I am urging that his positive mysterianism in fact will not survive sustained, honest, courageous rational reflection.

Suppose a man could stand on one hand. Observing this man, it would be idle to claim that it's impossible for a man to stand on one hand. I've never observed such a thing, but if a man told me that he'd done or seen this, unusual and as antecedently unlikely as it is, without a defeater, I'd reasonably believe him. I could reasonably point out, though, that this stance is an unsustainable one. Given the structure of the human body, one can only pull off this trick for a short time. A standing-on-one-hand posture would be an unworkable general strategy for a human being in the world. The positive mysterian is like our imaginary acrobat. Most people simply can't pull off the maneuver; it takes someone with a high level of epistemic and logical sophistication to do it, someone like Anderson.[34] Hence, the greater popularity of Redirection and negative mysterian Resistance among catholic Christians at large. In order to dodge the arrows of

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33 At least, in a full-blooded sense of "belief". It may be that one can to a very slight degree continue to believe what has been (to some degree) undercut.

34 Compare with Thomas Reid's comments about a radical skeptic:

We are born under a necessity of trusting our reasoning and judging powers; and a real belief of their being fallacious [i.e. unreliable] cannot be maintained for any considerable time by the greatest sceptic, because it is doing violence to our constitution [i.e. to our built in tendencies as humans]. It is like a man's walking upon his hands, a feat which some men upon occasion can exhibit; but no man ever made a long journey in this manner. Cease to admire his dexterity, and he will, like other men, betake himself to his legs. (Reid 1872, IV.5, p. 448a)

Reid's analogy is humorous, and I don't mean to suggest that Anderson or other positive mysterians are taking that stance merely to gain the admiration of onlookers! My point is rather that their stance is unnatural and for that reason unsustainable. As Reid observes, "...such is the constitution of the human mind, that evidence discerned by us, forces a corresponding degree of assent." (*ibid.*) The positive mysterian has a mind like anyone else, and cannot long avoid the troublesome evidence in the form of seemings which I highlight below.

the real or imagined anti-catholic, sophisticated thinkers like Anderson can adopt a positive mysterian stance. But, I suggest, they can't, while remaining intellectually honest and reflective Christians, maintain the stance long term. The epistemic pitfalls, I shall now argue, are too many and ultimately unavoidable. Just as the human body prevents one from living a flourishing life balanced on one hand, so I shall argue, our epistemic situation ensures that positive mysterianism is never a reasonable long-term stance for the reflective Christian believer.

Seemings vary in strength. This is easiest to see, when after adequate reflection you consider some claim P and its contradictory, not-P. If it seems to you that P, and about equally strongly it seems to you that not-P, you should suspend judgment about whether or not P. If your intuition that P is significantly stronger than your intuition that not-P, then you should believe P, and disbelieve not-P. And so on. There are a couple of important things to note. First, there is a top level to seeming-strength. We have some intuitions such that none are stronger. As long it is seems obviously contradictory to suppose that not-P, it maximally seems to you that P. Second, to know something, it must with a certain degree of strength seem to be so, when you consider the issue. Knowing that P requires fairly firmly believing that P, and this requires that when you wonder whether or not P, it fairly strongly seems to you that P. Thus, knowledge requires only a lesser strength than maximal seeming, although still a fairly high or strong degree. Finally, there can be middle levels of seeming – more than the minimum required for knowledge, but less than maximal strength.

Let's turn, then, to religious claims which appear to be inconsistent with one another. For any such alleged positive mystery, there will be two claims which seem true to the believer, and it will also seem to her that they can't both be true. Note that the religious claims themselves will never seem true to her at the maximal level. Claims like "God is three persons" or "Jesus is all-knowing" are not like "1+1=2" or "There are no square circles." Even though some believers believe them very firmly because they very strongly seem true, they are not such that to the believer, the opposite is obviously contradictory. Let us, then, label the levels of seeming, where 1 = seems only strongly enough for knowledge, 2 = seems more strongly than is needed for knowledge, and 3 = maximal seeming, where the thing in question seems as strongly as anything does to us. We'll call the two seemingly incompatible religious claims P and Q, and the claim that P and Q are inconsistent I.[35] It turns out, given this apparatus, and the assumption that no element of a religious mystery ever seems at the maximal level, there are only 12 cases to consider.

Case #	P	Q	I	Reasonable Responses
1	2	2	3	believe: I, not-(P and Q) withhold: P, Q
2	1	1	3	believe: I, not-(P and Q) withhold: P, Q
3	2	2	2	withhold: I, P, Q

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35 In other words, one or more of these seems true (for either material or strict implication): P ↔ not-Q, not-Q ↔ P, not-P ↔ Q, Q ↔ not-P, P → not-Q, not-Q → P, not-P → Q, Q → not-P.

4	2	1	1	believe: P, not-(Q and I) withhold: Q, I
5	1	2	1	believe: Q, not-(P and I) withhold: P, I
6	1	1	2	believe: I, not-(P and Q) withhold: P, Q
7	**2**	**2**	**1**	**believe: P, Q, not-I**
8	2	1	2	believe: P, I, not-Q
9	1	2	2	believe: Q, I, not-P
10	1	1	1	withhold: P, Q, I
11	1	2	3	believe: Q, I, not-P
12	2	1	3	believe P, I, not-Q

Case number 7 is the only one in which the believer reasonably believes the mystery constituted by P and Q. In all the other cases, assuming her mind is functioning properly, she'll automatically not believe one of P or Q – either withholding or believing instead the opposite of at least one of them.

Positive mysterians hold that Christian believers may rather often be in circumstances like case 7 above. I disagree; I agree that it is *possible* to be in that epistemic situation, but I don't believe that I am, or that most others are for very long. Consider the factors that can keep one out of case 7. For one, you may re-examine your grounds for believing one of P or Q, and find that it seems less strongly to you than before. This collapses a type-7 situation into a 4 or 5; you've abandoned mysterian Resistance for Revision. Again, suppose you hold on to your belief in both P and Q, and yet the more you think about them, the more it seems to you that both can't be true. This development collapses a 7 into a case 1 or 3. To drop to case 3 is to adopt the strategy of Restraint, thus abandoning mysterian Resistance, and to drop to 1 is to abandon Resistance for Revision.

Could the claim I really reach the level of 3 (as in cases 1, 2, 11, 12)? It could, for I may turn out to be an obviously necessary truth. Or it may be that Q really turns out to be or obviously imply not-P, or that P really turns out to be or obviously imply not-Q. Consider this would-be mystery: P = "Jesus is God and the Father of Jesus is God" and Q = "Jesus is not the Father of Jesus." All the occurrences of "is" here mean numerical identity.[36] It seems as strongly as anything does, that numerical identity is a transitive relation, that is, that for any "three" things, if the first and second are the same, and the second and third are the same, then the first and the third are the same. Thus I seems *very* strongly to be true, arguably at the maximal level of 3, and so the believer may not reasonably believe this paradox, being in scenario 1, 2, 11, or

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36 Also called strict, classical, absolute, or Leibnizian identity. Thus in standard symbols, using "j" to name Jesus, and "f" to name his father, and "g" to name the one true God, P would be j = g & f = g, and Q would be not-(f = j), that is, f ≠ j. Anderson doesn't claim this as a legitimate mystery, although he does hold that the biblical believer must explicitly believe j = g, f = g, and j ≠ f, and so must *implicitly* believe s ≠ f. (Email to author, April 3, 2009.)

12. But even if the level of I is only 2 the mystery is wrecked, for if so, our believer is at case 3, 6, 8, or 9. Again, if one is aware of a simple, valid argument for I, such that each premise seems true at level 2 or 3, that will raise I to at least level 2.

When arguing against what he calls "antideductivism", Anderson properly insists on self-evident laws of logic, propositions which seem true to us at least at level 2. The strategy of "antideductivism" urges that the claims of revelation are not subject to laws of logic such as *modus ponens*. The idea is that a Christian may on the basis of the Bible believe both P, and if P then Q, but is *not* permitted to infer Q.[37] Anderson raises two strong objections. First, he complains that this theory arbitrarily holds onto the principle of non-contradiction, while denying other claims with equal epistemic status. Second, he observes that

> ...it stretches credibility to [the] breaking point to suppose that one's belief in Christian doctrines could be warranted to such a degree as to compel one to reject otherwise impeccable laws of deduction. ...[Moreover,] if we were to decide to reject [such logical principles]... then the necessary truth of other propositions with the same phenomenology could easily be cast into doubt.[38]

Indeed. But then, in some cases, the I proposition has to do with obvious truths such as the transitivity of identity or the indiscernibility of identicals, and so will seem true at level 2 or even 3, and the P and Q will thus *not* constitute a reasonably believed paradox.[39]

The general lesson is that we "fall out of" a mystery situation if new information or new reflection on old information significantly raises the level at which I seems to true. This has been known to happen through the study of metaphysics, logic, and/or precise (philosophical) theology. The other way to "fall out of" case 7 is to lower the level at which P, Q, or both seem true. This happens mainly through the study of the Bible, biblical exegesis, and historical and recent systematic theology. To continue the above example, suppose that after much study, the believer finds there is little reason to hold that Bible teaches Jesus and God to be numerically identical, and much reason to deny it.

But the study of philosophy and logic can and should affect one's Bible interpretation as well. The reason is that such study heightens one's awareness of logical consistency and inconsistency, and it is a basic principle of interpretation, for any speaker or text, to try to avoid inconsistent interpretations. To read an author as inconsistent is to attribute irrationality or confusion to him. Better to assume that he means something consistent, until one rules out all the coherent and otherwise plausible interpretive options.

Suppose, then, in reading the Bible, I find what looks like an inconsistency. What am I to do? I ought not rest in this interpretation without doing a lot of work. Are there not other readings on which the passage in question comes out consistent? There are probably many. I

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37 Anderson (2007, pp. 114-7).

38 Anderson (2007, p. 116).

39 Anderson professes a willingness to surrender any metaphysical intuition which conflicts with scripture, and yet some of the "metaphysical" principles he's willing to abandon are arguably epistemically on a par with these "logical" ones he considers inviolable. Thus, I don't see any principled basis for this stance. Anderson gestures at metaphysical disputes about identity and the self as lowering the epistemic status of the relevant metaphysical principles (Anderson 2007, pp. 293-7), but he doesn't accept this sort of argument for the logical principles, particularly the law of non-contradiction, which has been ably and repeatedly challenged in recent philosophy by dialetheists. On this, see the rousing debate in Priest et. al. (2004).

notice that great scholars have held several of them. How, then, can I be sure that my paradoxical interpretation is the correct one? Suppose I *can* rule out all these competing readings; then both sides of the paradox may seem true to me strongly enough to be known (if either is in fact true) – that is, the P and the Q may rise to the level of 1 in our chart above. But this is a case 2, 6, or 10 – I won't be in a position to reasonably believe this paradox.

Can the paradoxical seemings each rise to a level 2, while their incompatibility (I) remains at level 1? I doubt it, given the disagreement of experts who are either far above me in knowledge relevant to Bible interpretation, or even if I'm myself an expert, so that the dissenters are my epistemic peers rather than my superiors. I'm *not* saying that in every case, if it seems to me that the Bible teaches P, and I find that someone who seems to be a relevant expert denies it, that in all cases I thereby have a defeater for my belief that the Bible teaches P. To the contrary, I think we can sometimes *know* things which we know some known or believed experts to deny. What I'm saying is that when you're aware of multiple experts who don't hold your interpretation, this, if your rational faculties are properly functioning, ought to somewhat lower your confidence in your interpretation. You may still *know* it is so, but it won't seem to you that it is so at level 2.[40]

The case is all the more difficult if I'm the average man in the pew. I may lack the time, resources, and ability to properly explore the many readings of the passage in question. Given this, it's hard to see how I'll arrive in a position where I can reasonably believe a persistent, firm, apparent contradiction, because it'll be hard to raise the level of each side of the paradox above level 1. I'll more likely choose Restraint or Redirection (which I may do by invoking mystery language), or Resolution, which dissolves the apparent inconsistency, at the risk of heresy.

In the face of the above reflections, some mysterians may concede that the elements of their mystery each seem true to them only at level 1 (strongly enough for each to be known, if it is true, but not significantly stronger, or at maximal strength). But case 7, one may think, isn't the only one where one can reasonably believe a mystery. What if the values for P, Q, and I are respectively 1, 1, and less than 1? My reply is that if "less than one" means less than but really close to one, it's really a case 10. But if the I seems significantly less strongly than would be required for knowledge if I is true, then we simply don't have a paradox at all. Suppose your P is "God is one." and your Q is "God is somehow three." Sometimes, it may seem to you that I, namely that P and Q aren't both true. But this seeming of I will be fleeting and weak, not persistent and strong. In fact, the believer here is retreating from mysterian Resistance to either Restraint or Resolution through Revision, in the form of a deliberately vague belief.

One may worry that my threefold metric of seeming-strength is carrying too much weight in the argument above. Would the same sort of argument go through, if we were to suppose, say, six or eight levels of seeming-strength?[41] I believe it would, as the more finely-described cases would end up being relevantly like the ones above. But rather than assault the reader with ever expanding charts, let me try to show that the three-level metric for seemings isn't essential to the argument. For any two seemings, either the first is noticeably stronger than the second, or vice-versa, or neither (that is, they're equal in strength, or nearly so – neither one is *distinctly* "felt" or

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40 I am presupposing a position which has recently been explored in epistemological discussions of disagreements between epistemic peers, namely what Adam Elga (2010) calls a "partially conciliatory" view on disagreement.
41 James Anderson has raised this objection in an email to the author. (April 3, 2009)

"seen" more strongly or clearly than the other). Back then, to our P, Q, and I – the application is clear. Let ">" and "<" denote noticeably stronger and weaker, and let "≈" denote the lack of any such relation between two seemings. Again, we assume that each seems strongly enough to be firmly believed and known.

Case 1: If either I > P and/or I > Q, then one ought to deny at least one of: P, Q.
Case 2: If I < P and I < Q, then one ought to deny I.
Case 3: If I ≈ P and/or I ≈ Q, then either withhold on all three, or weakly (less firmly) believe at most whichever two seem *ever so slightly* more strongly than the third.

Only Case 2 scenarios involve mysteries - reasonably and firmly believed, even known apparent contradictions. In Case 1 scenarios, it would be unreasonable to embrace the paradox. Case 3 scenarios are the most interesting. In many Case 3 scenarios, of course, one would choose the way of Restraint. But suppose P, Q, and I seem true to you with about the same strength, and yet *sometimes,* at least, P and Q as it were stand out from I a little. Metaphorically, they all look unfocused, but sometimes I seems just a bit *more* unfocused than the others. (Think of being in the chair at the optometrist - "In which case is the letter more focused, with lens number one or with lens number two?") In such a case, might it not be rational to affirm the paradoxical pair P and Q? I think so. And yet, it can only by the nature of the case be a very lightly and weakly held belief. It would a tentative and hesitating commitment, and a fragile one, in that it could very easily succumb to a very minor change in how those three claims appear to you. It couldn't serve as a core belief, as a belief which you take as axiomatic, as it were, building a lot of other beliefs about important matters partially on it. Moreover, it couldn't be something you know[42], nor does it have the strength and stability required of a core religious commitment.[43] Thus, I would say that these are not mystery cases, even though some of them would involve to some small degree believing a paradox, and doing this reasonably. These are not the sorts of mysteries envisioned by Anderson's religious epistemology; as he says, in the case of a genuine mystery, "the claims in question must be warranted to a significant degree: at minimum, to a degree sufficient for knowledge."[44]

V. Conclusion

I've argued that the positive mysterian approach is unpromising, as one will typically lack strong enough reason to embrace apparently inconsistent theological claims. Anderson supposes that "doctrinal paradox originates in the biblical data and not merely in the conciliar interpretations of it", and quotes John Calvin's statement that "the early [i.e. at least the first four ecumenical] councils... contain nothing but the pure and genuine exposition of scripture."[45] To my eyes, this last claim is demonstrably wrong; the content of the councils' claims plainly includes elements

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42 Like Anderson, I agree with Alvin Plantinga that a belief must have must be fairly strong or firm to be known. See Anderson (2007, p. 171).

43 In Plantinga's words, "For the person with faith (at least in the paradigmatic instances), the great things of the gospel seem clearly true, obvious, and compelling. She finds herself convinced – just as she does in the case of clear memory beliefs or her belief in the elementary truths of arithmetic. Phenomenologically... there is no similarity at all to a leap in the dark." He observes in a footnote that her degree of belief will typically *not* be maximal (2000, p. 264).

44 Anderson (2007, p. 266).

45 Anderson (2007, pp. 268, 200).

neither implicit nor explicit in the Bible. Despite what many of them thought they were doing, they were constructively theorizing about how to best understand the content which *is* explicitly or implicitly in the Bible. And Anderson's brief attempts to attribute apparent contradictions to the Bible are in my view hamstrung by his failure to consider other apparently consistent readings.[46] I can't deal with these substantial hermeneutical issues here, but can only note their importance in evaluating the real-world payoff of positive mysterianism.

Anderson repeatedly warns us of "rationalism" or of having a "rationalistic mindset". This amounts to being someone with an unreasonable aversion to apparent contradictions, who is thus reluctant "to subordinate human intuitions to the control of revelation", instead choosing to "distort the revelational data."[47] In reply, opposition to mysterianism needn't be based on an *a priori* insistence that there can't be an apparent contradiction which may be reasonably believed. I grant the possibility. It is fundamental to our lives as rational beings that we trust how things seem to us. Obviously, it can be rational, in the right circumstances, to distrust how things seem. If I know that I've been drugged, I will not believe, on the basis of my visual experience, that the wall before me is melting. If I knew I was in the Matrix, or a disembodied brain in an elaborate laboratory experiment, I wouldn't trust any of my sensory seemings. If I knew that I were geometrically incompetent, I wouldn't trust my intuitions about squares and circles. And if I had overwhelming evidence that P and Q had been revealed by an all-knowing, morally perfect, and so eminently trustworthy God, I would reasonably disregard my intuition that I (that P and Q are inconsistent and so can't be true), and I would know both P and Q. But as we've seen, many factors can prevent one from being in this position. No "rationalism" - no brash, unjustified overconfidence in human powers of speculation – appears here, but only our default trust in the reliability of our faculties which is reasonable assumed by all sane humans.

Positive mysterianism is only as well motivated as are the apparently contradictory interpretations of scripture which make it necessary. Christian philosophers tend to shy away from it, and I believe they are wise to do so. On the other hand, it is not unusual to Christian philosophers to mix mysterian Resistance in an unprincipled manner with Resolution through Rational Reconstruction. Many theologians wisely recognize the mis-fits between many Rational Reconstructions and the historical catholic tradition(s), but they tend to underestimate the epistemic difficulties of positive mysterian Resistance. To his credit, Anderson squarely faces these difficulties, but without, I've argued, showing the stance to be reasonable and sustainable.

In sum, the prospects for positive mysterian Resistance seem poor. We ought carefully to distinguish this project from the historically more popular negative mysterian form of Resistance, for the failure of the one doesn't imply the failure of the other. I suggest that Christian philosophers should invest more intellectual energy into the prospects of negative mysterian Resistance, as well as Resolution via Revision. And I suggest that many theologians should realize that they been far too optimistic about positive mysterian Resistance, and should explore other options.[48]

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46 Anderson (2007, pp. 268-73).

47 Anderson (2007, pp. 281, 306).

48 My thanks to James Anderson for lengthy and helpful correspondence about these issues, to my colleagues Andrew Cullison, Neil Feit, and Stephen Kershnar for their helpful feedback on multiple versions of this paper, and to an anonymous referee for this journal for his or her comments.

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