

# Positive Mysterianism Undefeated: A Response to Dale Tuggy

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In *Paradox in Christian Theology* I argued that the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation are paradoxical (that is, they appear to involve implicit contradictions) yet Christians can still be rational in affirming and believing those doctrines.<sup>1</sup> A recent paper by Dale Tuggy characterizes my theory of theological paradox as a form of “positive mysterianism” and argues that the theory “faces steep epistemic problems, and is at best a temporarily reasonable but ultimately unsustainable stance.”<sup>2</sup> In this paper I show that Tuggy’s arguments for this verdict are problematic and far from conclusive.

In the first section of the paper I summarize the core argument of my book and its proposed model for the rational affirmation of theological paradox. I then consider whether my proposal is indeed a form of “positive mysterianism” as Tuggy defines the term. In the third and fourth sections, I address the two main criticisms raised in Tuggy’s paper: first, that the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility cannot bear the weight required by my defense of paradox, and second, that my proposed model is afflicted with epistemic instability. Finally, I argue that Tuggy has yet to adequately address the real issue at stake between our two positions, and I offer some preliminary reflections on how that issue should be resolved.

## 1. Paradox in Christian Theology

*Paradox and Christian Theology* considers two basic questions: (1) Are any essential Christian doctrines genuinely paradoxical?<sup>3</sup> (2) If so, can a Christian be rational in believing those

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<sup>1</sup> James N. Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology: An Analysis of Its Presence, Character, and Epistemic Status*, Paternoster Theological Monographs (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Dale Tuggy, “On Positive Mysterianism,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, no. 69 (2010): 205-226.

<sup>3</sup> I define a paradox as “a set of claims which taken in conjunction appear to be logically inconsistent.” Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology*, 5–6.

doctrines? I answer both questions affirmatively. In the first half of the book I argue that the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, as derived from Scripture and formulated in the ecumenical creeds, are indeed paradoxical. This point has been recognized by numerous theologians from various Christian traditions, and even the most sophisticated attempts to articulate these doctrines in ways that avoid paradox without sacrificing orthodoxy have proven unsuccessful.<sup>4</sup> Since Tuggy agrees with me on this point (it's one of the main reasons he rejects the orthodox doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation) I will take it for granted in the remainder of this paper.

In the second half of the book I present and defend a model for the rational affirmation of paradoxical theology (hereafter, the RAPT model). The RAPT model represents a further extension of Alvin Plantinga's "extended A/C model" for warranted Christian beliefs.<sup>5</sup> According to Plantinga's model, basic Christian beliefs, including the belief that God is the principal author of the Bible, are epistemically warranted by virtue of the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit; indeed, these beliefs can be warranted to a degree sufficient for knowledge.<sup>6</sup> However, Plantinga does not explain how Christian doctrines (such as the Trinity) that are not *explicitly stated* in the Bible can be also warranted. The RAPT model therefore extends Plantinga's model to explain how these doctrines can be warranted for Christians in a variety of ways, depending on their degree of theological sophistication. In each case, however, a warranted belief in a Christian doctrine is *ultimately* dependent on careful study of the biblical texts by church scholars, coupled with a warranted belief in biblical inspiration.<sup>7</sup>

One might think that even if a doctrine is initially warranted for a Christian, once he realizes that it is paradoxical he will have an *epistemic defeater* for his belief in that doctrine. Specifically, he will have a *rebutting* defeater; a reason to think that the doctrine is actually

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 31–59, 80–106.

<sup>5</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 241–266.

<sup>7</sup> Anderson, 199–209.

*false* (since contradictory claims cannot all be true).<sup>8</sup> If this is the case, rationality demands that he eventually revise his beliefs in some way (e.g., by abandoning his belief that the doctrine really is taught in the Bible or that the Bible really is divinely inspired in the way he thought). According to the RAPT model, however, while the paradoxicality of a doctrine may be a *potential* defeater, it need not be an *actual* defeater—and in the most important cases, it won't be. I give several reasons for taking this stance. First, we should recognize that an apparent contradiction need not be a genuine contradiction; it may be a *merely apparent* contradiction. In such cases, the appearance of contradiction typically arises from the presence of an *unarticulated equivocation* in the terms used. Thus a paradoxical Christian doctrine can be understood to be a *merely apparent contradiction resulting from an unarticulated equivocation* (MACRUE).<sup>9</sup> As I point out in my book, this analysis of theological paradox fits very well with the classical doctrine of analogy, which maintains that the language we use to describe ourselves and the world applies only *analogically* to God, rather than univocally; there is substantial overlap of meaning but no precise identity.<sup>10</sup> In any event, on this understanding of theological paradox none of the classical laws of logic are violated.

As a general rule, it's reasonable to infer from *X appears to be the case* that *X really is the case*. But according to the RAPT model the inference from *doctrine D appears to be logically inconsistent* to *doctrine D really is logically inconsistent* should be resisted in the case of the Trinity and the Incarnation, for two basic reasons. First, the individual component claims of these doctrines are strongly warranted by Scripture. This fact alone serves to insulate the doctrine, at least to some degree, from epistemic defeat by the mere appearance of contradiction.<sup>11</sup> Second, the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility gives Christians further

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<sup>8</sup> For a helpful overview of the concept of defeaters in contemporary epistemology, see Michael C. Sudduth, "Epistemological Defeaters," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2008, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/ep-defea/>.

<sup>9</sup> For examples of non-theological MACRUEs, see Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology*, 222–224, 230.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 233–236. I note in passing that Tuggy's paper neglects to mention the contribution of the doctrine of analogy to my defense of theological paradox.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 250–251. See also the section "Defeater-Defeaters" (4.c) in Sudduth, "Epistemological Defeaters." I address later in this paper Tuggy's objection to the claim that these doctrines are well supported by Scripture.

reason to withhold the inference. If God is necessarily beyond human comprehension,<sup>12</sup> we shouldn't be all that surprised to encounter elements of paradox in our thinking and speaking about God. Why should we take for granted that our limited conceptual apparatus is sufficiently refined to allow us to grasp and articulate the metaphysics of the Trinity without any residue of paradox? Christians have commonly viewed the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation as "mysteries". If the notion of doctrinal mystery is grounded in divine incomprehensibility, it can serve as a *defeater-defeater* with respect to theological paradox by giving the Christian adequate reason to think that any apparent contradictions in divinely revealed doctrines are *merely* apparent.<sup>13</sup>

It's important to recognize that while my explanation and defense of the RAPT model involves some technical philosophical concepts, the model itself requires no great sophistication on the part of Christians who come to recognize the paradoxicality of doctrines such as the Trinity and the Incarnation. As I explained in the book, it is entirely plausible to construe 'ordinary' believers as typically thinking along the following lines:

Well, doctrine *D* is certainly a head-scratcher and I don't pretend for a moment that I can spell it out in a way that shows it to be logically consistent. But doesn't the Bible say that God's ways are far beyond our human understanding? So wouldn't it be quite presumptuous for me to think that I could get my head around *every* doctrine in such a way that it makes perfect logical sense—not least those doctrines concerned with God's inner being and the way he relates to his creation? Perhaps this is just one case in which we don't know (and maybe *can't* know) enough about heavenly matters to grasp and explain just *how* these things can be so. For all I know, God alone is in a position to see how it all fits together logically. Yet it seems clear to me that *D*

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<sup>12</sup> The claim that God is *incomprehensible* should not be confused with the claim that God is *inapprehensible*. The RAPT model assumes only that our knowledge of God is *limited* and *imprecise*, at least in some significant respects; it does not entail that we have no knowledge of God at all.

<sup>13</sup> I employ the following definition of mystery: "A mystery is a metaphysical state of affairs the revelation of which appears implicitly contradictory to us on account of present limitations in our cognitive apparatus and thus resists systematic description in a perspicuously consistent manner." Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology*, 245. Note that a mystery can serve as a *defeater-insulator* as well as a *defeater-defeater*. *Ibid.*, 246–255.

faithfully expresses the teaching of Scripture, so it must be true nonetheless and I'll continue to believe it so far as my limited understanding allows.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. Positive Mysterianism

In his insightful paper "On Positive Mysterianism" Dale Tuggy distinguishes four general ways in which religious believers respond to apparent contradictions within their theology: Redirection, Resistance, Restraint, and Resolution.<sup>15</sup> *Redirection* is a popular but unprincipled response that essentially amounts to changing the subject; it is not the response of people who are "committed to rational reflection on their own religious beliefs," and thus may be readily dismissed as intellectually irresponsible. *Restraint* is the response of the believer who recognizes the apparent contradiction within a doctrine, yet is unwilling to abandon that doctrine, so he simply "shrugs his shoulders and admits that he doesn't know what the source [of the doctrine] is asserting." He concedes that some ways of understanding the doctrine are indeed inconsistent, but he doesn't endorse any of those interpretations; he tacitly assumes that there must be *some* consistent understanding of the doctrine, but confesses that he can't specify what it is (even if others perhaps could). "Restraint is a way of stalling," Tuggy observes; while it may be *initially* reasonable, "eventually it hardens into an irresponsible stance."<sup>16</sup>

The remaining two options are more respectable, since both face up to the problem and try to find rational solutions. *Resolution* is an attempt to get rid of the apparent contradictions altogether, by reinterpreting or revising the doctrines in question. As Tuggy notes, both of these Resolution strategies face formidable obstacles.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, those who advocate *Resistance* maintain that "the reasonable response is to learn to live with them." We may not be able to

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 260.

<sup>15</sup>Tuggy, "On Positive Mysterianism," 206–209.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 207.

<sup>17</sup>For some arguments against doctrinal revision as a response to theological paradox, see Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology*, 126–131.

banish the paradoxes, but we can at least *tolerate* them without sacrificing our rationality in the process.<sup>18</sup>

The remainder of Tuggy's paper focuses on a particularly prominent form of Resistance which he dubs 'mysterianism':

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 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.<sup>19</sup>

Tuggy further distinguishes between 'negative' and 'positive' versions of mysterianism:

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 profoundly revealed truths are entertained.<sup>20</sup>

With these definitions in place, Tuggy generously describes the theory developed in my book as "the most epistemologically sophisticated version of positive mysterian Resistance to date."<sup>21</sup> It might be seen as ungrateful, even churlish, to quibble with this accolade, but nevertheless I

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<sup>18</sup> "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." Tuggy, "On Positive Mysterianism," 209.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Almost identical definitions of negative and positive mysterianism can be found in Dale Tuggy, "Trinity," ed. Edward N. Zalta, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2009, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trinity/>.

<sup>21</sup> Tuggy, "On Positive Mysterianism," 210.

wish briefly to evaluate the utility of Tuggy's definitions and to consider whether indeed the RAPT model ought to be viewed as a form of positive mysterianism (as Tuggy defines it).

One might first question whether *negative* mysterianism really is an instance of Resistance rather than Restraint. The Restrained theologian, we're told, rejects any interpretation of doctrine D that appears inconsistent, but he doesn't offer any positive (and consistent) alternative interpretation. Rather, he takes a basically *agnostic* stance toward the propositional content of D. But how does this differ in practice from the approach of the negative mysterian, who prescribes "proper tutoring" (presumably involving the identification and rejection of apparently contradictory understandings of D) with the result that we are left in "darkness" regarding the actual content of D? It's hard to see what really distinguishes negative mysterian Resistance from plain old Restraint.

This minor taxonomical criticism aside, my greater concern is whether the RAPT model meets Tuggy's definition of *positive* mysterianism. On my theory, it is certainly true that some core Christian doctrines seem to contain "at least one explicit or implicit contradiction."<sup>22</sup> But are the paradoxes due to a lack of "understandable content"? Yes—but in a very specific sense. As I see it, the *individual component claims* of these doctrines are understandable, at least to a significant extent; they have positive semantic content.<sup>23</sup> For example, in the case of the doctrine of the Trinity we have a basic intuitive sense of what each of the following affirmations mean:

- (1) There is only one God.
- (2) The Father is divine.
- (3) The Son is divine.
- (4) The Holy Spirit is divine.
- (5) The Father is distinct from the Son.
- (6) The Father is distinct from the Holy Spirit.
- (7) The Son is distinct from the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>22</sup> I argue that the contradictions are implicit rather than explicit. Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology*, 108–109.

<sup>23</sup> This is one important respect in which my theory parts company with *negative* mysterianism.

We have an adequate understanding of each of these affirmations considered individually. What we *don't* understand, of course, is *how all of them can be true*. What accounts for this puzzle, so I contend, is that we lack the precise metaphysical concepts and distinctions that would allow us to see how these statements can be logically reconciled.<sup>24</sup> The doctrine of the Trinity is, in an important sense, an *approximation*. It isn't maximally precise. But if much of our language about God is analogical, this shouldn't be a controversial claim. It's simply a consequence of our creaturehood. So when Tuggy states that, according to my theory, certain Christian doctrines lack "understandable content," he is correct *given his definition* of "understandable content" (since his definition *stipulates* that a doctrine must seem consistent). But I want to emphasize that on my theory the doctrine is not altogether unintelligible or lacking in any meaningful content. It is only that our understanding of its component claims is *insufficiently precise* to allow us to perceive its logical coherence.<sup>25</sup>

With this clarification in place, we can now see why it's misleading to say that according to the RAPT model the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation are paradoxical because of "an abundance of content". It's not that we have *too much* information about the Trinity and the Incarnation. No, the reality is that we have *too little* information—not enough, at any rate, to allow us to readily resolve the paradoxes. Semantic imprecision corresponds to a *shortage* of content, not an abundance of content.

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<sup>24</sup> Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology*, 241–243.

<sup>25</sup> A mathematical analogy will illustrate the point. Imagine a man—call him Integral Ian—who lacks altogether the concept of fractional numbers. He can think only in terms of whole numbers. Suppose that Integral Ian is asked to accept, on very good authority, the following four claims: (1) Town A is 8 miles from Town B; (2) Town B is 9 miles from Town C; (3) Town A is 16 miles from Town C; (4) Town B lies on the straight line between Town A and Town C. As Ian sees the matter, these four claims appear to be inconsistent (assuming Euclidian geometry!). But the source of the claims knows that they were *approximate* statements. More precisely, Town A is 7.7 miles from Town B, Town B is 8.7 miles from Town C, and Town A is 16.4 miles from Town C. The statements weren't really inconsistent; they were only imprecise, rounded to the nearest whole number. Integral Ian not only lacked this additional information, he also lacked the conceptual framework to *grasp* that information. He was therefore unable to perceive how the four claims could cohere.



For these reasons I have some reservations about Tuggy's characterization of my approach as a form of positive mysterianism, at least as he defines it. Nevertheless, since my theory clearly involves an appeal to theological mystery and I maintain that paradoxical doctrines have positive semantic content (as opposed to that form of apophatic theology according to which we can know God only by way of denial) I'm content to accept the label "positive mysterianism" subject to the important clarifications given above.<sup>26</sup>

### 3. The Relevance of Divine Incomprehensibility

Having characterized my defense of theological paradox as a form of positive mysterianism, Tuggy proceeds to raise two distinct lines of objection to it. The first concerns my use of divine incomprehensibility. Tuggy argues that this doctrine can't bear the weight that my theory places on it. His first complaint is that my doctrine of incomprehensibility is *trivial*: if it merely states that we can't know all there is to know about God then the doctrine is obvious and uncontroversial.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, on this definition of incomprehensibility it's plausible to think that many other things are also incomprehensible to us. As Tuggy observes, if "a complete and perfect physics is unattainable in this life ... then a humble mouse may also be incomprehensible, along with billions of other physical entities."<sup>28</sup> Why then should we tolerate apparent contradictions in theology but not in mousology?

Good question. As a matter of fact, I do believe that the creation is also incomprehensible, and that this logically follows from the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility. For if the creation derives its meaning from its Creator and every part of the creation is necessarily related to its Creator, then in order to fully comprehend the creation one would also have to fully comprehend the Creator. Moreover, I don't take the view that paradoxes should only be

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<sup>26</sup> For some criticisms of apophatic theology, see Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology*, 133–135.

<sup>27</sup> Since I've claimed that the RAPT model is applicable to all Christians, not just theological sophisticates, I should think that the obviousness of the doctrine works to my advantage.

<sup>28</sup> Tuggy, "On Positive Mysterianism," 214.

expected in theology. The history of philosophy is in large measure the history of paradoxes.<sup>29</sup> Many of our pre-philosophical intuitions appear to conflict and one of the primary tasks of the philosopher to identify these *prima facie* contradictions and propose ways of resolving them. Yet a good number of these paradoxes have proven stubbornly resistant to resolution. Science has its paradoxes too; it is well known, for example, that quantum theory and relativity theory seem to be fundamentally incompatible, even though both have considerable empirical support.<sup>30</sup> Various theories for reconciling them have been proposed, but a satisfactory resolution remains elusive. Physicists assume, reasonably enough, that there *is* a solution to the problem, and it's entirely possible that someone will discover that solution in the future. Yet it's equally possible that the solution will forever elude us, simply because we're not cognitively equipped to formulate it. The problem of consciousness—the relationship between the mind and the brain—is another case in point.<sup>31</sup> At any rate, we cannot assume *a priori* that humans have the cognitive capacity to eventually lay bare all the mysteries of the universe—whether in science, in philosophy, or in theology.<sup>32</sup>

But even if this point is granted we should recognize that incomprehensibility comes in *degrees*. As Tuggy rightly observes, our ability to comprehend an object depends partly on how much epistemic access we have to it. In the case of God, Tuggy adds, our epistemic access to him is “entirely within his control.” So isn't it reasonable to assume that God, as a loving parent

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<sup>29</sup> Nicholas Rescher, *Paradoxes: Their Roots, Range, and Resolution* (Chicago & La Salle, IL: Open Court, 2001); Roy Sorensen, *A Brief History of the Paradox: Philosophy and the Labyrinths of the Mind* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2005); R. M. Sainsbury, *Paradoxes*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>30</sup> For an overview of the incompatibility problems, see Steven Weinstein and Dean Rickles, “Quantum Gravity,” ed. Edward N. Zalta, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2011, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/quantum-gravity/>; Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions, and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory* (W. Norton & Company, 2003), 117–131.

<sup>31</sup> See especially Colin McGinn, *Problems in Philosophy: The Limits of Inquiry* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1993), chap. 2; Colin McGinn, *The Mysterious Flame: Conscious Minds In A Material World* (Basic Books, 2000). McGinn's stance was dubbed the “New Mysterianism” years before Tuggy adopted the term for use in philosophy of religion.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. van Inwagen's “concluding meditation” on the limits of metaphysics. Peter Van Inwagen, *Metaphysics, Dimensions of Philosophy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1983), 200–201.

who wants the best for his children, would avoid confusing Christians with a self-revelation that gives rise to paradoxical doctrines, either by limiting what he reveals or by equipping us with the cognitive capability to satisfactorily resolve any apparent contradictions in that revelation?<sup>33</sup>

Not so fast. If divine incomprehensibility is a necessary consequence of our creaturehood, it isn't strictly correct to say that our epistemic access to God is *entirely* under his control. Furthermore, as any engineer knows, design always involves trade-offs. Often one part of a product must be limited to allow for other features that are deemed more important or more valuable. Wouldn't it have been extremely useful for humans to be able to fly? (Just recall the last time you had to clean out your gutters.) So why didn't God give us wings? What about a second pair of eyes in the back of our heads? Wouldn't echolocation have been handy too? It's reasonable to assume that these features were omitted because they would have interfered with other, more important elements of God's design plan for humans.<sup>34</sup> In the same way, our cognitive design plan almost certainly involved some necessary trade-offs.<sup>35</sup> Considered as an abstract possibility, God *could* have arranged things so that his self-revelation was paradox-free, just as he *could* have given us wings and 360° vision. But given our limited knowledge of the design plan, we shouldn't leap to the conclusion that God most likely *did* so arrange things. We simply don't know enough to make that judgment.

Tuggy notes that in my book I offer five suggestions as to why God would have *positive reason* for allowing some paradoxes in our theology.<sup>36</sup> By way of rebuttal, he first observes that "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

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Tuggy, "On Positive Mysterianism," 214.

<sup>34</sup> Note that we don't need to be able to specify *how* they would have interfered in order to reasonably conclude that they *would* have done. I should mention in passing (for those who care about such matters) that the notion of a design plan for humans isn't incompatible with a evolutionary view of human origins, provided one allows for a providentially directed or guided evolution (as theistic evolutionists often do).

<sup>35</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 38–40; Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology*, 282.

<sup>36</sup> Tuggy, "On Positive Mysterianism," 214–215. Some of these reasons would also apply to other areas of study, such as philosophy and science.

persistent apparent contradictions.”<sup>37</sup> Agreed—but by the very same token, for all we know God *couldn't* achieve those aims without doing so. As I see it, we're simply not in a position to say one way or the other. We don't know enough about our cognitive design plan, including any trade-offs in that design plan, and we don't know enough about the metaphysics of the Trinity and the Incarnation, to be able to say that the prior probability of theological paradox is low. So the RAPT model cannot be dismissed *a priori* in this fashion.

Tuggy also questions the cogency of each of my five suggestions, leveling specific criticisms at three of them. While I believe his criticisms are misguided in all three cases, I will not argue the point here, not merely to spare the reader's patience but because in the end my theory doesn't *require* me to identify positive reasons for God permitting or inducing MACRUEs. For even if I concede Tuggy's point that “the prior probability of God inducing MACRUEs in us is either low or inscrutable,” the doctrine of incomprehensibility can still serve as a defeater-defeater (or defeater-insulator) with respect to theological paradox (i.e., as an undercutting defeater for the inference from *D appears to be logically inconsistent* to *D is false*).

We can see this point by reflecting on the parallel I've drawn between the problem of theological paradox and the problem of evil.<sup>38</sup> It's commonly argued that apparently gratuitous evil in the world provides good reason to believe that there is no God. One popular response to this argument (the so-called “skeptical theist” response) is to argue that we shouldn't expect, given the basic tenets of theism, to find ourselves in a position to perceive God's morally sufficient reasons for permitting every instance of evil.<sup>39</sup> For this response to succeed one doesn't have to go so far as to insist that apparently gratuitous evil is *probable* given theism.

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<sup>37</sup> According to Tuggy, the positive mysterian “by definition posits persistent and irresolvable apparent contradictions.” I maintain that the paradoxes of the Trinity and the Incarnation have not yet been resolved, and that we have no reason to *assume* that they will be resolved in the future, but I have never argued that the paradoxes *cannot* or *will not* be resolved. Rather, I argue that it can be rational for Christians to affirm theological paradoxes *while they remain unresolved*, whether or not they can be resolved in principle (by us) or will be resolved at some future date. Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology*, 287, fn. 34.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 254–255.

<sup>39</sup> For an overview of this response, see Justin P. McBrayer, “Skeptical Theism,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2010, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/skept-th/>.

One only has to grant that it is *plausible* given theism. The same goes for the RAPT model. The model doesn't require that MACRUEs are *probable* given Christian theism; it is sufficient for them to be *plausible* given theism.<sup>40</sup>

Little is lost then by conceding that the presence of MACRUEs is neither entailed nor rendered particularly probable by the doctrine of incomprehensibility. As Tuggy notes, in subsequent correspondence I've argued that my theory doesn't hang on either of these stronger inferences. Instead, I've suggested that the doctrine can serve as the *best explanation* for the phenomena encountered by the orthodox Christian believer. Tuggy reformulates my argument in terms of 'seemings':

It seems to catholic Cathy (1) that the Bible is inspired, and (2) that it teaches E and 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 of 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.<sup>41</sup>

I'd prefer to say that divine incomprehensibility is *one element* of the best explanation, but otherwise this is a fair representation of my proposal. If I'm right about this, it follows that Cathy is not rationally required to relinquish any of her four beliefs, even though she's presently

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<sup>40</sup> Here's another illustration of the point. Suppose that a crime is committed, and the only DNA found at the scene of the crime (other than the victim's) matches Don's. Based on rigorous forensic work, the police are convinced that the DNA belongs to the perpetrator. Yet dozens of reliable witnesses testify that Don was at a conference thousands of miles away at the time of the crime. One explanation for this apparent contradiction is that Don has an identical twin brother who committed the crime. Even though such twins are statistically rare, this explanation can still serve as an undercutting defeater for the conclusion that either (a) the DNA test was flawed or (b) all the witnesses were lying or mistaken.

<sup>41</sup> Tuggy, "On Positive Mysterianism," 216. Tuggy uses the term "catholic" to designate "the broad tradition which is shared by Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestants deriving from the Magisterial Reformation." Ibid., 205, fn. 1. For simplicity I have followed his usage throughout this paper.

unable to explain or perceive how E and N can both be true. Tuggy objects that I have jumped too quickly from the claim that this is *one* explanation for Cathy's seemings to the claim that it is the *best* explanation. Another explanation—one that Tuggy favors, as we will see—is that the Bible doesn't really teach E and N after all; Cathy and her fellow catholic Christians have been unwittingly blinkered by their doctrinal traditions.<sup>42</sup> In favor of this alternative he invokes the standard principle of interpretation that one shouldn't attribute apparently contradictory claims to an author except as a last resort.

While I agree with this principle of interpretation, I would also note that it must be applied in concert with other standard principles of textual interpretation, such as those requiring us to observe the semantic ranges of words, grammatical norms, and historical-cultural contexts. We cannot rule out *a priori* that an author is making claims that he knows will appear (at least in some respects) inconsistent to us. Indeed, that may be the most warranted conclusion, all things considered, if the alternative readings violate too many other principles of textual interpretation. What is needed at this juncture is for Tuggy to declare his hand, by laying out his alternative readings of the relevant biblical texts (e.g., those commonly cited in support of the deity of Christ) so that they can be evaluated alongside the traditional catholic readings.

To my best knowledge, Tuggy has yet to do that in any published work. He declares his conviction that “in the cases of the Trinity and the Incarnation, ultimately unreasonably [sic] loyalty to catholic traditions of biblical interpretation are playing a key role in Anderson's thinking”—and presumably the same goes for myriad other catholic Christians—but he declines to argue the point. Consequently, he has yet to make good on his charge that my appeal to divine incomprehensibility is misguided or ultimately unsuccessful. For whether an appeal to mystery is rationally justified will depend crucially on the *exegetical* question of whether the traditional readings of the biblical texts are superior to Tuggy's non-traditional readings. On this determinative issue Tuggy has thus far offered only promissory notes. I shall return to this point later; for now I merely note that Tuggy's first line of objection to the RAPT model must be judged inconclusive as it stands.

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<sup>42</sup> This certainly raises the question of how those doctrinal traditions could have gained such momentum in the first place, especially when (as Tuggy believes) they are crippled by apparent contradictions.

## 4. The Charge of Epistemic Instability

Tuggy's second line of objection is that the mysterian stance toward theological paradox is "unstable or fragile" even though it may be reasonable "for some people at some times".<sup>43</sup> The charge here is that the mysterian's stance can easily become irrational on sustained reflection or with the addition of new information. As I noted earlier, I have argued that the cognitive situation of the Christian who affirms the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation can be analyzed in terms of epistemic defeaters, defeater-defeaters, and defeater-insulators.<sup>44</sup> The recognition that some doctrine *D* is paradoxical presents *S* with a *potential* defeater for *S*'s belief that *D* is true (which is based in turn on *S*'s belief that *D* is taught in the Bible and that the Bible is divinely inspired). However, this potential defeater can itself be defeated by *S*'s belief in divine incomprehensibility. That is to say, it can be rational for *S* to *withhold* the inference from *D appears to be contradictory* to *D is false* on the basis that *D* could well be a MACRUE originating in divine mystery.<sup>45</sup>

In the RAPT model the defeaters are all characterized as *beliefs*, but Tuggy points out that defeaters needn't be beliefs.<sup>46</sup> *Seemings* can also be defeaters—or at least potential defeaters. Having previously noted that beliefs are commonly formed on the basis of seemings, Tuggy recommends that we "analyze defeat scenarios as involving conflicting seemings, even when we're thinking of defeater and defeatee as both beliefs." On this way of viewing the matter, the Christian mysterian is faced with three conflicting seemings: it seems to him (1) that religious claim *P* is true, (2) that religious claim *Q* is true, and (3) that *P* and *Q* are incompatible (call this

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<sup>43</sup> Tuggy, "On Positive Mysterianism," 219.

<sup>44</sup> Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology*, 246–261.

<sup>45</sup> See footnote 13 for my definition of mystery. In the book I point out that if *S*'s belief in *D* is sufficiently warranted, that belief may be *intrinsically* insulated against defeat by the paradoxicality of *D*, even in the absence of any consideration of divine incomprehensibility. *Ibid.*, 248–250. Nevertheless, I grant that the potential defeater would still diminish *S*'s warrant for believing *D* to some degree. For this reason I will assume that *S* must also rely on other defeater-defeaters or defeater-insulators.

<sup>46</sup> For the record, I acknowledge in my book that defeaters can be doxastic or non-doxastic. *Ibid.*, 211.

claim I).<sup>47</sup> Tuggy objects that the mysterian approach to dealing with these three seemings is the intellectual equivalent of standing on one hand: it may be possible for some gifted people, but it's very unnatural and it cannot be sustained indefinitely. It's an acrobatic feat only available to believers "with a high level of epistemic and logical sophistication," and even those gifted folk cannot maintain the stance long term "while remaining intellectually honest and reflective Christians."<sup>48</sup>

How does Tuggy propose to make this charge of epistemic instability stick? His approach is to develop an apparatus for analyzing all the possible ways in which these seemings might arise and what the rational response should be in each case. He begins by observing that seemings vary in strength. Some claims seem to be true as strongly as anything *could* seem true (e.g., "1 + 1 = 2" or "There are no square circles"). Other claims seem very strongly to be true, but not so strong as to be considered self-evident or indubitable (e.g., "There's a tree outside my office window"). Still other claims seem true to a degree sufficient for knowledge, but not much more strongly than that (e.g., "I met Roger in Walmart last Tuesday").<sup>49</sup> Tuggy therefore proposes a simple threefold metric for seeming-strength: 1 = "seems only strongly enough for knowledge"; 2 = "seems more strongly than is needed for knowledge"; 3 = "maximal seeming, where the thing in question seems as strongly as anything does to us".<sup>50</sup>

Armed with this metric, and adding the plausible assumption that "no element of a religious mystery ever seems at the maximal level," Tuggy notes that there are only 12 cases to consider. He tabulates these 12 cases as follows, along with what he regards as the reasonable response to each case:

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<sup>47</sup> In the case of some doctrines, e.g., the Trinity, the paradox is the product of more than two claims. However, Tuggy's analysis can easily be extended to cover those cases.

<sup>48</sup> Tuggy, "On Positive Mysterianism," 219.

<sup>49</sup> Tuggy and I agree that a belief must be held fairly firmly in order to count as knowledge; it follows that if a belief B is held on the basis of one or more seemings, those seemings must be sufficiently strong for B to qualify as knowledge (assuming that the other necessary conditions for warrant are satisfied).

<sup>50</sup> Tuggy, "On Positive Mysterianism," 220.



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
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
<b>7</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>Believe: P, Q, not-I</b>
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

On the basis of this analysis, Tuggy draws the following conclusion:

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 on or believing instead the opposite of at least one of them.<sup>51</sup>

Tuggy's attempt to analyze the epistemic stance of the mysterian in a rigorous systematic way must be applauded. Nevertheless, I believe his apparatus is flawed in a number of respects. In the first place, not all beliefs are formed on the basis of seemings or in conscious response to seemings. For example, my belief that I exist appears to be a properly basic belief and one that arises immediately. While it's certainly true that it *seems* to me that I exist, so far as I can tell my belief that I exist isn't formed *on the basis of* such a seeming. In principle the same may go for some of my religious beliefs. For instance, one of the component claims of the doctrine of the Trinity is that there exists one and only one God. If Plantinga's A/C model (or something close) is correct then this monotheistic belief is formed basically and immediately via the *sensus*

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

*divinitatis* rather than via the testimony of the Bible.<sup>52</sup> Granted, this cannot be the case for all the claims that give rise to theological paradoxes (e.g., the claim “Jesus was divine”) but even if it is the case for some it raises questions about the validity of Tuggy’s analysis.

This leads to a related point, namely, that Tuggy’s approach seems strongly biased toward an internalist epistemology, according to which the rationality of *S*’s beliefs is ultimately determined by the extent to which *S*’s beliefs are proportioned to the evidence available to *S* (the evidence in this case consisting of *S*’s seemings).<sup>53</sup> As Tuggy is aware, my RAPT model is developed in the context of an externalist epistemology, according to which some of our beliefs can be warranted simply in virtue of the cognitive process by which they were formed, without being based on internally available evidence (such as seemings).<sup>54</sup> This is not to say, of course, that seemings are epistemically irrelevant or that they cannot serve as potential defeaters—I’ve already acknowledged that they can—but only to observe that Tuggy’s analysis appears to lean heavily on a disputed epistemological thesis about how religious beliefs are warranted.

Even if we lay these concerns aside and grant the basic epistemological framework within which Tuggy develops his objection, further concerns can be raised about his analysis. Note first that his apparatus can misleadingly give the impression that case 7 is *a priori* improbable, simply because it constitutes only one case out of twelve.<sup>55</sup> It’s important to recognize that the mere delineation of these twelve cases tell us nothing at all about which cases are more or less likely to arise in practice. Certainly it would be a mistake to assume that the cases are *a priori* equiprobable. The real issue is not whether instances of case 7 are more or less likely to arise relative to other cases, but whether it’s plausible that specific doctrines such as the Trinity and the Incarnation fall into case 7 for many Christians—and if so, whether it’s plausible that they would *remain* in case 7 even after sustained reflection.

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<sup>52</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 167–184.

<sup>53</sup> For a sophisticated example of such an epistemology, see Richard Swinburne, *Epistemic Justification* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).

<sup>54</sup> For my defense of an externalist epistemology, see Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology*, 160–164.

<sup>55</sup> I don’t suggest that Tuggy *intended* it to mislead in this way, but I believe its tendency to mislead needs to be highlighted nonetheless.

Another worry about Tuggy's apparatus pertains to the coarseness of the metric. Consider case 3, for example. In this case, all three claims seem very strongly to be true. According to Tuggy, the reasonable response here is *to withhold belief in all three claims*. As I'll argue shortly, it's far from clear that this is the only reasonable response, or even the most reasonable response. But leaving that aside for now, note that case 3 would include scenarios in which all three claims seem very strongly to be true, but the seemings of P and Q are slightly stronger than the seeming of I. Wouldn't the reasonable response in that scenarios be to disbelieve I? Or consider the situation in which all three claims seem very strongly to be true, but frankly you just can't tell which seemings are the strongest. What would be the reasonable response then? It's hard to say. At any rate, it's not obvious that you wouldn't be within your epistemic rights to continue to believe P and Q.

Tuggy addresses this worry about the coarseness of his metric by pointing out that the three-level metric 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 "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 the 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  $I \approx P$  and/or  $I \approx Q$ , then either withhold on all three, or weakly (less firmly) believe at most whichever two seem *ever so slightly* more strongly than the third.<sup>56</sup>

Tuggy observes that only the second of these three cases allows for rational affirmation of a paradox. (Note that case 2 here corresponds to case 7 in the original apparatus.) He concedes that it *could* be rational to retain belief in P and Q in the third case, but "it can only by the

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<sup>56</sup> Tuggy, "On Positive Mysterianism," 223.

nature of the case be a very lightly and weakly held belief.”<sup>57</sup> Such a “tentative and hesitating commitment” couldn’t amount to *knowledge*, nor could it serve as the kind of firmly-held core doctrine that most Christians take the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation to be.

So Tuggy grants that a Christian *could* rationally believe in a paradoxical doctrine (case 7 in the original scheme; case 2 in the simplified scheme). What then does his objection amount to? In short, he contends that only rarely will Christian believers find themselves in such mysterian-favorable circumstances, and those who do will not remain there for long. He invites us to consider various factors that could keep or move one out of this case. These factors fall into two basic categories. First, the seeming strength of I could be *raised* “through the study of metaphysics, logic, and/or precise (philosophical) theology.” In other words, one’s awareness of the apparent incompatibility between P and Q could be sharpened or intensified. Second, the seeming strength of P or Q (or both) could be *lowered* “mainly through the study of the Bible, biblical exegesis, and historical and recent systematic theology.” Concerning this second pitfall, Tuggy suggests that if one learns there are multiple experts who hold a different interpretation of the Bible (i.e., they hold that the Bible doesn’t teach both P and Q), that discovery should at least lower the confidence in one’s own interpretation.

No doubt there are many ways in which confidence in I *could* be raised or confidence in P or Q *could* be lowered. The problem for Tuggy is that this claim isn’t nearly strong enough to sustain his charge of epistemic instability. He needs to argue not merely that there are various factors that *could* lead a Christian to “fall out of a mystery situation” but that these factors are *very likely* to arise for the typical Christian believer. In light of his acrobatics analogy, he ought to show that they’re as inevitable as gravity pulling a one-hand-stander back onto his feet. In fact, the aptness of the analogy is the very point in question: Tuggy needs to show that the mysterian stance, with respect to the Trinity and the Incarnation, really is more akin to balancing on one hand than, say, walking along a narrow path on two feet. If the latter is the more fitting analogy, merely pointing out the many ways one *could* stumble gives no reason to think that such walking is unnatural or unstable.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 224..

On close examination, nothing in Tuggy's discussion of these factors amounts to much more than suggestion or insinuation. The most significant point he raises is that of disagreement among experts about the teachings of the Bible. One objection to this argument is that it proves too much; given the wide diversity of views that can be found among biblical scholars, the same logic should lead us to conclude that Christians ought not to have *any* confident beliefs about what the Bible teaches.<sup>58</sup> In any case, suppose that having studied the Bible you reach the conclusion that it teaches both P and Q. You later discover that some biblical scholars argue that the Bible doesn't really teach P, while others contend that the Bible doesn't really teach Q. You seriously consider their arguments; you revisit the biblical texts that are traditionally taken to teach P and Q; but after carefully considering the matter it seems just as strongly to you that the Bible teaches P and Q. Why then should you believe P or Q any less strongly than before? For that matter, it's plausible to think that your confidence in P and Q could be *boosted* by this further reflection on them in comparison with non-traditional alternatives.

There is one more flaw in Tuggy's analysis, and I believe it to be the hole that sinks the ship. The problem is that his scheme does not consider other reasonable doxastic responses to conflicting seemings. Tuggy assumes that if one is presented with three conflicting seemings then the only reasonable response is to *outright reject* one of the seemings (i.e., to withhold or disbelieve one of P, Q, or I). But other rational responses are possible, even preferable, here. Take the case of scientific Simon. It seems strongly to Simon that both quantum mechanics and general relativity are true, because they are both elegant and consistent theories that have proven empirically successful (i.e., both theories have made observational predictions that have been subsequently confirmed). However, after reading several books on the subject, it also seems strongly to Simon that these two scientific theories are incompatible at a number of points. Simon spends some time reviewing the scientific arguments for both theories, as well as the conflicts between them, but these three seemings remain as strong as before, if not stronger. What should scientific Simon conclude? Should he reject quantum mechanics, or reject general relativity, or reject the idea that they're incompatible?

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<sup>58</sup> Once again we see a conspicuously internalist epistemology at work.

Surely one reasonable response is for Simon to try to accommodate all three seemings, but with some qualifications in light of his conviction that there cannot be any *genuine* contradictions (thus no scientific theory can be both true and false). Simon might reasonably conclude that both theories are *good approximate descriptions of physical reality* that could in principle be reconciled with the addition of further information. The theories aren't outright false, but neither are they maximally precise.<sup>59</sup> Applying certain conceptual refinements to our understanding of these theories would permit us to see that the conflicts are merely apparent, the product of conceptual (and thus semantic) imprecision on our part.<sup>60</sup> In other words, the conflicts are MACRUEs. The obvious advantage of this more moderate stance is that it allows Simon to "save the phenomena" by forming a *further* belief about his epistemic situation *vis-à-vis* the source of his seemings. It's not that any of his seemings are altogether misleading; it's only that he lacks the additional information which would allow him to perceive the coherence of the underlying reality that is presented to him in those seemings. (The same goes, of course, for his fellow scientists who find themselves in the same epistemic situation.)

I suggest that if this is a reasonable response for scientific Simon then *mutatis mutandis* it is no less reasonable a response for catholic Cathy. Suppose it strongly seems to Cathy that the Bible teaches, for example, both (P) that Jesus was omniscient and (Q) that Jesus was ignorant of some facts, such as the date of his return. Since she believes Jesus was one person, it also strongly seems to her (I) that these teachings are implicitly inconsistent.<sup>61</sup> Does Cathy have to reject either P or Q or I? No: another stance is available to her. It's reasonable for her to continue to believe P and Q and I—even to firmly believe them—provided she *also* believes

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<sup>59</sup> One thinks here of the relationship between Newtonian physics and Einsteinian physics. The former isn't so much false as it is a simplification of the latter, a simplification that is more than adequate for most engineering purposes.

<sup>60</sup> As I understand it, this is precisely what string theorists hope to accomplish. A "theory of everything" wouldn't *replace* quantum mechanics and general relativity; rather, it would incorporate refined versions of both theories within one unified framework.

<sup>61</sup> We can further assume that Cathy has studied various attempts to reconcile P and Q (e.g., Thomas Morris's two-minds model) but has not found any of them to be entirely satisfying; that is to say, it still seems to her that P and Q are implicitly inconsistent.

that the conflict in her seemings doesn't go "all the way down"; that it is due to a lack of information or understanding on her part rather than a genuinely inconsistent state of affairs. She therefore continues to accept the seemings, but she does so in a qualified manner. She takes it that P and Q are the best way for her to conceptualize matters given the information available to her, but they don't represent the whole story. This is precisely the epistemic stance posited by the RAPT model. I contend not only that this is a reasonable stance but furthermore that Tuggy's analysis gives no reason to think this wouldn't be the *most* reasonable stance, provided all of Cathy's seemings are sufficiently strong. His apparatus simply isn't refined enough to recognize this sort of epistemic stance. In short, Tuggy's net is too coarse to catch Cathy's fish.

One final matter must be briefly addressed before moving on. Tuggy objects that the mysterian stance is only feasible for intellectually sophisticated Christians:

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 sophistication to do it, someone like Anderson.<sup>62</sup>

I've already noted that the aptness of the acrobat analogy is one of the very points in question. Here I simply observe that Tuggy considerably overstates the level of epistemic sophistication required for a stable mysterian stance. The scenario I outlined above requires no great logical or theological sophistication on Cathy's part, nor does it require any unnatural steps of reasoning. On the contrary, it strikes me as the most natural and conservative way to rationally accommodate her seemings in light of her other well-founded beliefs: beliefs about the Bible, about the transcendence of God, and about the natural limitations of her mind. If Cathy has sufficient acumen to recognize paradoxes in her religious beliefs in the first place, there's no reason to doubt she has the intellectual capacity to rationally accommodate those paradoxes in much the same way that I do.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Tuggy, "On Positive Mysterianism," 219.

<sup>63</sup>This is not to say there couldn't be more or less sophisticated forms of mysterian stance. The point is that the less sophisticated forms can be just as rational.

In light of these shortcomings of Tuggy's analysis, I conclude he has not succeeded in showing that the mysterian stance with respect to the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation is epistemically unstable.

## 5. What's the Real Issue? Prolegomena to Any Future Exegesis

I've argued that Tuggy's two principled objections to positive mysterianism are unsuccessful. He has failed to show that a mysterian stance with respect to paradoxical Christian doctrines is *in principle* unreasonable, unnatural, or unsustainable. Where then does this leave the debate over the prospects of positive mysterianism? In this final section I want to suggest that the real issue here isn't the cogency of the mysterian stance *as such* but rather the specific biblical warrant for taking that stance with respect to the Trinity and the Incarnation. For those who accept the divine inspiration of the Bible, whether or not the mysterian stance is warranted will ultimately depend on their warrant for believing that the Bible really does teach the component claims of the traditional catholic doctrines; for example, whether the New Testament really does teach that Jesus is divine. The viability of mysterianism thus depends less on matters of *epistemology* than on matters of *exegesis*.

There are several indications in Tuggy's paper that, in the end, he agrees with this point. Consider first the following:

In my view, this appraisal of the early councils [viz. Calvin's judgment that they "contain nothing but the pure and genuine exposition of Scripture"—JA] 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 not been any form of epistemic dogmatism, but rather biblical exegesis.<sup>64</sup>

Concerning the proper interpretation of Scripture, Tuggy cites (as I noted earlier) the principle that one should accept a paradoxical reading only as a last resort:

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),

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<sup>64</sup> Tuggy, "On Positive Mysterianism," 217, fn. 31.



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 [sic] 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.<sup>65</sup>

A footnote elaborates:

I have in mind his over-quick argument that the Bible implies an apparently inconsistent Trinity doctrine. (Anderson 2007, pp. 267-271) 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 of these. On these schemes, see Tuggy (2009b), especially the supplementary documents on unitarianism and the history of Trinity doctrines.<sup>66</sup>

Whether or not one finds these claims a tad presumptuous, it seems clear that Tuggy regards exegetical factors as decisive here. Were catholic believers only more acquainted with non-catholic theological schemes and the alternative readings of the relevant biblical texts which motivate them, they would realize that the mysterian stance has no firm legs to stand on.

The most telling concession, however, is found in Tuggy's concluding comments. Once again he takes issue with the claim that the orthodox formulations of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation reflect a faithful reading of the biblical texts:

Anderson supposes that "doctrinal paradox originates in the biblical data and not merely in the conciliar interpretations of it" ... To my eyes, this last claim is demonstrably wrong; the content of the councils' claims plainly includes elements 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. I can't deal with these substantial

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 217, fn. 32. "Tuggy (2009b)" refers to Tuggy, "Trinity."

hermeneutical issues here, but can only note their importance in evaluating the real-world payoff of positive mysterianism.<sup>67</sup>

After brushing aside my warnings about the pitfalls of theological rationalism, Tuggy concludes:

Positive mysterianism is only as well motivated as are the apparently contradictory interpretations of scripture which make it necessary.<sup>68</sup>

On this point, we are in full agreement. This is indeed the very nub of the issue. Tuggy has, in effect, thrown down the gauntlet and challenged catholic Christians who favor positive mysterianism to a duel, with biblical texts as the weapons of choice. The challenger, however, has yet to unsheathe his sword. Tuggy's critique of positive mysterianism does not discuss any alternative interpretations of the relevant biblical texts (such as those commonly taken to teach or imply the deity of Christ). To have done so, he suggests, would have gone beyond the scope of his paper, the aim of which was to raise more philosophical concerns about my defense of theological paradox. Fair enough; it was for similar reasons that I didn't provide a detailed exegesis of such texts in my book.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Tuggy, "On Positive Mysterianism," 224–225.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>69</sup> I did, however, cite numerous biblical texts that present *prima facie* support for theological paradoxes. Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology*, 267–71. For some recent exegetical defenses of the deity and preexistence of Christ, see Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007); Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008); Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *The Deity of Christ, Theology in Community* (Crossway Books, 2011); Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Eerdmans, 2008); Richard Bauckham, "Monotheism and Christology in the Gospel of John," in *Contours of Christology in the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker, McMaster New Testament Studies (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 148-166; Richard Bauckham, "Monotheism and Christology in Hebrews 1," in *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism*, ed. Loren T. Stuckenbruck and Wendy North, Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series (London: T. & T. Clark, 2004), 167-185; Simon J. Gathercole, *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Eerdmans, 2006).

Still, to my knowledge Tuggy hasn't defended his alternative interpretations in any other publications, nor has he indicated where convincing defenses of his favored alternatives can be found. Consequently it is difficult to know where to begin in evaluating Tuggy's contention that positive mysterianism cannot be biblically sustained. But if an exegetical duel is on the cards, it will be important to establish some ground rules to ensure fair play. I therefore propose three hermeneutical principles that ought to be observed in any future exegesis.

First, we should recognize the illegitimacy of any hermeneutic that *by design* would rule out orthodox-but-paradoxical readings of the Bible. Tuggy seems to accept this point in principle, but it must be rigorously observed in practice.<sup>70</sup> For example, John 1:1-18 is widely held to be one of the most significant texts in support of the pre-existence and deity of Christ. Whether or not a plausible alternative interpretation can be defended on textual and contextual grounds, it won't do to argue in this fashion: "John *couldn't* have been affirming the deity of Christ, because then he would have been contradicting what he teaches elsewhere in the same book, namely, that the Father is the only true God (John 17:3)!" That, of course, would beg the whole question against the positive mysterian by barring paradox at the door. We must ask instead: Which readings of the texts—the traditional readings or Tuggy's alternative readings—do least overall violence to those texts? Which interpretations treat the texts most naturally on their own terms, without imposing preconceptions of what they can and cannot mean?

Secondly, while Tuggy rightly advocates a principle of charity for the *authors* of texts (that we should normally avoid attributing apparently contradictory claims to them) I suggest that we should also apply a principle of charity for the *audiences* of texts, to the effect that how readers *do in fact* understand a text can be an important guide to how that text *ought* to be read. To be clear: I'm *not* advocating here a postmodernist reader-response theory of textual meaning; I want to insist that the notion of authorial intent lies at the heart of a biblical hermeneutic. Nevertheless, it remains that an accomplished writer will understand how to communicate well with his target audience—he'll know how such-and-such a sentence would likely be understood by a sympathetic and attentive reader—and he will communicate on that basis. In the case of

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<sup>70</sup> Tuggy allows such a reading "as a sort of last resort". Tuggy, "On Positive Mysterianism," 217.

the Bible, the primary author is God and the primary target audience is believers. What this suggests is that one litmus test for a proposed interpretation of a biblical text is how prominent that reading has been among believers in the past. Thus, when evaluating Tuggy's alternative interpretations of the relevant texts, it's reasonable to ask how popular such readings have been throughout church history. If those alternative readings are demonstrably superior, as Tuggy apparently holds, why have the vast majority of believers read them so wrongly? Why is it that even Protestant exegetes who are self-consciously committed to *sola scriptura* haven't typically favored those readings?<sup>71</sup>

Thirdly, observe that Tuggy appeals to something like a principle of minimal confusion:

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.<sup>72</sup>

I agree that we should avoid attributing confusion to an author. Yet by the same token we should also avoid attributing to an author the intent to confuse his primary audience (absent some good reason to expect that in a particular case). Both of these principles presumably apply to the divine author of the Bible.<sup>73</sup> Tuggy thinks that these principles rule against the traditional reading of the New Testament, according to which Christ is a divine person who took on a human nature. Rather than directly rebut this view, for now I simply suggest that the second principle may well prove more damaging to his *alternative* reading.

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<sup>71</sup> Tuggy gestures at a psychological-cum-sociological explanation for the traditional readings, but this comes dangerously close to a genetic fallacy and in any case is a poor substitute for the hard work of exegesis. It also fails to take into account the telling fact that many *non*-catholics have come to the same conclusions. For example, liberal scholars often ascribe late dates (and pseudonymity) to the Gospel of John and the Epistle to the Colossians precisely because of their high christologies. Similarly, Jews and Muslims reject the New Testament in part because they recognize that it ascribes deity to Jesus, which they consider blasphemous. Pelikan aptly notes that the very existence of early docetic heresies is "a testimony to the tenacity of the conviction [among the early Christians] that Christ had to be God". Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition, Vol. 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 174.

<sup>72</sup> Tuggy, "On Positive Mysterianism," 222.

<sup>73</sup> Tuggy appears to endorse the second principle. *Ibid.*, 214.

Tuggy has recently declared his preference for “humanitarian Unitarianism”.<sup>74</sup> On this view, only the Father is *literally* God. Jesus of Nazareth was a mere human being, neither divine nor pre-existent. (This theory is to be distinguished from “subordinationist Unitarianism,” according to which the Father is the only true God, and the Son, while eternally existent and divine in some *derivative* sense, does not share the Father’s absolute deity.) Humanitarian Unitarians bear the burden of arguing that the many New Testament texts which seem to assert or presuppose the deity of Christ ought to be taken in a metaphorical or rhetorical sense (e.g., the authors use hyperbolic “divine agency” language: a human through whom God acts is spoken of as though he were God).

It must be granted that such readings are *possible*; they cannot be dismissed out of hand. But when evaluating whether these alternative readings are *superior* to the traditional readings we must ask this question: If the humanitarian Unitarian view *were* correct, how surprising would it be to encounter the sort of statements about Jesus in the New Testament that we do in fact encounter?<sup>75</sup> Would those statements be a natural way to communicate such a view—or would they be a very confusing way? In fact, the exegetical debate can *almost* be boiled down to this one question: On which view, the mysterian Trinitarian view or the humanitarian Unitarian view, would the relevant biblical texts be *least* confusing as a revelation of that view? While I cannot argue the point here, I suggest that the biblical statements we actually have to deal with are just the sort of statements one would expect if mysterian Trinitarianism were true, but the same cannot be said of Tuggy’s humanitarian Unitarianism. If I’m right about this, mysterian Trinitarians have nothing to fear from an exegetical showdown.

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<sup>74</sup> <http://trinities.org/blog/archives/2739>. For a helpful historical survey of Unitarianism and its variants, see the supplement (“Unitarianism”) to Tuggy, “Trinity.”

<sup>75</sup> One thinks particularly of texts such as John 1:1-18, Phil. 2:6-11, Col. 1:15-20 & 2:9-10, Heb. 1:1-12, and Rev. 22:13 (cf. 21:6).