How Will Our Children Know God?
Resisting Cultural Epistemologies that Hinder Spiritual Wisdom

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The gospel of Luke (24:13-32) tells the story of two people walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus a few days after Jesus was crucified. They are talking about what happened on Golgotha, lamenting the death of the one they thought might be the Messiah. A third person joins them and, seemingly ignorant of current events, asks them why they are so caught up in conversation about a man being put to death. They tell him all that they had hoped for from Jesus and how puzzled and upset they are in the wake of his death. The newcomer begins telling stories from the Hebrew Scriptures, focusing particularly on the prophecies of the Messiah's

coming. His words intrigue the two travelers and they invite him to stay over for supper when they reach their destination. During the meal, the visitor takes a loaf of bread and breaks it, giving each of his companions a portion. Suddenly the travelers realize what they had not known until that moment: the person with whom they have spent the day is Jesus, the Christ, the embodiment of the Truth they have been seeking all their lives. As their minds embrace this knowledge – cultivated through reflection on their lived experience, the tutelage of the biblical narrative, and participation in sacred ritual – their Teacher disappears from sight. Yet their certainty that Christ has come remains and sends them forth to share the Good News.

Human beings have wrestled throughout history with questions of how and what we can know as persons living in finite time and space. In particular, we have wondered if it is possible to truly know God, what ideas or truths are part of this knowledge of God, and in what ways we are capable of using human resources, such as the mind or scientific methods, to know what is eternal and true. Working with contextually-influenced epistemological assumptions, we have crafted religious education theories to shape how we teach Christian faith to children, youth, and adults. Such theories are often congruent with the general education theories of their time.

This essay will explore historic and contemporary relationships between epistemologies, educational theories, and Christian faith to suggest that current cultural understandings of knowledge and knowing – as represented in state-based learning standards, federal policies such as "No Child Left Behind," advocacy groups such as the Council of the Great City Schools, and market-driven standardized testing companies such as the College Board – present theological and theoretical difficulties for cultivating spiritual knowledge and wisdom. Specifically, I will

argue that general educational systems that promote concepts of knowledge and ability defined in terms of specific pieces of data subject to standardized assessment and marketability are insufficient models for, and even antithetical to, the cultivation of spiritual wisdom and faithful discipleship. Christian communities need to resist these hegemonic approaches and develop specific ways of helping children and youth recognize, assess and faithfully negotiate the tensions that arise between the public epistemologies that govern their general schooling and alternative religious models for Christian identity formation as persons who know and are known by God.

Epistemology and Historic Religious Education Theories

From the classical writings of Greek philosophers and ancient Judaism through the plethora of philosophical perspectives expressed in the late twentieth century, religious education theories have reflected aims, contexts, curricula, methods, and understandings of teachers and learners influenced by the epistemological claims of their eras. The primary debate has centered on the degrees to which reason and revelation contribute to spiritual knowledge. In this section, we will pay attention to negotiations among a fairly limited set of epistemological options that appear, disappear, and reappear over more than twenty centuries of Christian belief and practice.

Classical Greek and Judaic Perspectives

Classical Greek philosophy and ancient Jewish thinking brought different epistemologies to Christians' earliest understandings of religious education. Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle did not equate knowledge with particular opinions or beliefs, but with truths that

transcend time and place. To know, for them, required that human minds move beyond the earthly realm into a transcendent space in which pure ideas – not ideas constructed in relation to a specific historical time or location – could be accessed by a mind seeking true understanding. Plato believed that knowledge might be "the remembrance of ideas from a former existence" (Elias, 40). Isocrates held that pure ideas simply make sense to thoughtful people and can be identified as the "traditional wisdom" of a community or era (Elias, 5). Ancient Judaism also held a concept of eternal truth, but with far less conviction that humans could know that truth with absolute certainty. The prophetic texts of the Hebrew bible demonstrate that truth "does not always come from formal and official channels," but as often emerges from unexpected places (Elias, 8). The Writings (e.g. Psalms, Proverbs, Job) suggest that we know through observing our experiences, drawing general principles from our observations, and exploring how new experiences challenge and re-form previous generalizations. Some of these texts (e.g. Job 28:12-23) also characterize knowledge as a divine gift (Elias, 11). In every case, the ancient Jewish perspective holds that the purpose of knowledge is to draw us closer to the truth of God's order for creation and divine will for the world.

New Testament Viewpoints

Jesus, through his life and teaching, suggested that the traditional wisdom valued by Greek philosophers might fail to contain eternal truth because human interpretative practices can obscure truth. He continued the ancient Jewish emphasis on observing experience, but with a twist: truth becomes most apparent when experience is turned upside down and viewed from a non-conventional angle. Traditions may offer easy access to truth claims, but eternal truth lies so

deeply embedded in traditions that it must be discovered through encounters with symbols of truth that intersect with human experience – through interaction between the mystical and the empirical (Elias, 15). Paul and other leaders of the apostolic church located eternal knowledge in Christ as the embodiment of truth (Elias, 16, 21). Thus, to "know" was to be like Christ, to "put on" Christ so that one became an embodiment of truth as well. In both Romans 12:33-34 and I Corinthians 2:14-16, Paul argues that the human mind is no match for the inscrutable knowledge of God, but then observes that Christians "have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16). In Philippians 2:5, he exhorts Christians, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

Patristic and Benedictine Understandings

Many thinkers of the Patristic era understood knowledge in terms that combined apostolic concerns with Christ as the model of truth and Greek philosophical ideas about reason and encounters with the transcendent. Second century theologian Justin Martyr validated Greek views of knowledge by seeing them as derivative of the wisdom of Moses, and thus representative of earlier divine revelation (Elias, 26). Some third century theologians, such as Tertullian and Tatian, eschewed Greek philosophy in favor of a seemingly more direct conveyance of knowledge through Christian scriptures (Elias, 27). But the more persistent view, represented by Clement of Alexandria and Origen, claimed that there are different levels of knowledge: a lower level accessible to human reason, and a higher type known only with the help of divine illumination (Elias, 28). This dual level approach permitted a marriage of the truths of Greek philosophy and the ultimate truth known in Christ (Elias, 31).

Augustine of Hippo, who remains a highly influential figure in contemporary debates about spiritual knowledge, stressed to late fourth and early fifth century Christians that God plays a significant role in human knowing, in both intuitive and reason-based ways. He perpetuated the division of knowledge into two categories: "ordinary" or everyday knowledge discovered through the senses and processed by reason, and "wisdom" or spiritual knowledge known via divine illumination of the intellect when persons practice contemplation in search of God's truth (Elias, 40). The sixth century Benedictine tradition called Christians back to even greater reliance on divine revelation for all types of knowledge. Benedict of Nursia resisted humanity's growing reliance on sensory-based knowledge and truth validated by human authority by asserting God's essential role in the discernment of truth and devaluing scientific forms of knowing as inconsequential to knowledge of God.

Renaissance Debates

Renaissance theologians pursued several diverse ways of answering the question of how reason and revelation are related to human knowing. Bernard of Clairvaux extended the Benedictine argument that knowledge comes from revelation made known through human contemplation on the love of God (Elias, 55). Anselm made some room for reasoned knowledge by emphasizing the primacy of Christian belief in God's revelation and the need to reconcile reason and revelation through study designed to promote understanding of what one affirmed via belief (Elias, 53). Abelard gave reason an even greater role in shaping faith by allowing that persons could question the reality of God but would eventually work out via reason that what is claimed about God is true (Elias, 53). Hugh of St. Victor pulled the debate back closer to the

arguments of Clement and Origen affirming reason. He created a variety of knowledge categories, of which the spiritual knowledge one might attain via contemplation was only one kind of truth and other, rational means of knowing also had value (Elias, 56).

Thomist and Reformation Formulations

Thomas Aquinas built on the more reason-oriented Renaissance views. He argued that persons know God through critically observing the natural order of God's creation, and that because humans have the potential for perfection, they can – through reason – grow toward a perfect understanding of God based on this "natural theology" generated by moral and scientific reasoning. Aquinas held an optimistic view of human intelligence. He believed that intelligence, in conjunction with a holy disposition and sensory experience, fused faith and reason into knowledge (Elias, 62). His epistemology, however, was rejected by Martin Luther, who placed more emphasis on the role of grace – and thus divine revelation – than on natural reason, which he believed could succumb to evil impulses if not subsumed under faith (Elias, 90). Luther's perspective saw reasoning is a kind of human work and as such it could not lead to the sort of knowledge responsible for salvation, which rests entirely on grace. His Reformation era colleague, John Calvin, took a more balanced approach by valuing classical forms of knowledge as tools Christians can use in the study of scripture to help us recognize the truths revealed by God in those texts (Elias, 93).

Post-Reformation Responses

Like the Protestant reformers, the Puritans did not reject reason outright, but they placed much greater emphasis on the work of the Spirit in the attainment of truth. Such illumination came through religious experience rather than intellectual speculation. Cotton Mather preached a "saving knowledge" that comes through study of the bible and catechism (Elias, 121). Mather believed such study triggers knowledge implanted in the mind by the grace of God and points human reason toward its proper aim: the truth of God. The Quakers and John Wesley developed alternative epistemologies that stressed experiential knowledge over rationality. For the Quakers, a spiritual "inner light" known in and through community, rather than study, was the "prompt" for knowledge of the Divine (Elias, 123). Because Wesley believed in the depravity of humanity, he focused on the role of experiential knowledge and our need to be remade in the image of God rather than putting his trust in human reason as the means of knowing God (Elias, 119).

Enlightenment Reorientations

Enlightenment philosopher-theologians argued that, "knowledge comes from senses, experience, reason, and feelings rather than from authority, history, and tradition" (Elias, 127). To know, from their perspective, is a product of our intellectual freedom to gather data for critical reflection and for deciding what empirical existence points to as transcendent rational ideals. While thinkers such as Jean Jacques Rousseau and Emmanuel Kant believed that human minds are implanted with a "natural sentiment" or innate moral sense that directs the rational mind to seek God (Elias, 132-133), John Locke objected to any theory of innate knowledge and argued for scientific empiricism, or knowledge rooted in disciplined rational reflection on human experience (Elias, 134). Despite the challenge of the Great Awakenings, theologians such as

Jonathan Edwards rooted true knowledge in the experience of religious conversion and God's tutoring of persons through the religious affections (Elias, 163). The Enlightenment epistemology of a gradual and rational orientation of one's feelings toward the ideas of goodness and truth already implanted in the human soul by a loving God accompanied American Protestants into the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, courtesy of Horace Bushnell (Elias, 164).

Twentieth Century Claims

Liberal twentieth century Protestants highly valued the human potential to know through sustained rational reflection on the mysteries of life and faith. Religious educators such as George Coe and Sophia Lyon Fahs rejected notions of divine revelation and the transcendent authority of the bible as primary modes of knowing, preferring to rely on the rational frameworks of the social sciences as means for exploring and understanding what is true (Elias, 169). While Fahs also believed that children have mystical experiences of God before abstract cognitive capacities develop, she emphasized self-understanding as primary in the human quest for divine knowledge. Neo-orthodox religious educators such as H. Shelton Smith and Randolph Crump Miller countered the liberal emphasis on reasoned reflection with a renewed emphasis on divine revelation, particularly through the scriptures. Miller insisted that it is Jesus, through scripture, who reveals God to us in our seeking and bridges the gap between human experience and divine transcendence (Elias, 173-174).

Myriad other epistemological perspectives arose in the theologically pluralistic decades at the end of the twentieth century. Some religious educators endorsed a *socialization* approach in

which knowledge is communicated via community enculturation and transmission of traditional ideals (Elias, 177). Others continued the liberal Protestant embrace of the social sciences and valued a *developmental* understanding of knowledge as arising and growing in concert with cognition and reasoning skills (Elias, 179). Traditionally oppressed racial-ethnic groups advocated a *liberation* perspective of knowledge acquired through rational reflection on personal and communal experiences of oppression and justice-seeking (Elias, 180). An *evangelical* viewpoint reinforced the neo-Orthodox (and earlier) idea that supernatural truths are communicated via authoritative persons and institutions (Elias, 182). Women expressed *feminist, womanist, and mujerista* understandings that knowledge is embodied, both personally and communally, and that authority lies primarily in human experience rather than institutional pronouncements. Each of these perspectives attempted to negotiate the age-old challenge of weighing the epistemological roles of reason and revelation in what is widely recognized among mainstream Protestant Christians as a culturally constructed theory of knowledge.

Contemporary Cultural Depictions of Knowledge

I want to lay against this backdrop of historic epistemologies and religious education theories several prominent cultural depictions of childhood and adolescent education that have shaped the first decade of the twentieth-first century in the United States. The first is represented by the rhetoric of the College Board that designs and administers the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and SAT Subject tests which many institutions of higher education require as part of their admissions processes, the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT) which functions as a bar exam for federally funded scholarships (and is also known as the National Merit Scholarship

Qualifying Test, or NMSQT), and Advanced Placement (AP) exams which many secondary schools design courses around so that their students can earn college credit by examination. The second is expressed in Public Law 107-110, better known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which governs federal education funding practices and establishes national criteria for educational achievement. The third perspective is embodied in state learning standards that intersect with federal mandates and establish guidelines for structuring and assessing local school district goals, curricula, and teaching practices. A fourth viewpoint is embodied in the principles and assumptions of the Council of Great City Schools, a consulting and advocacy group made up of 66 urban school systems nationwide particularly concerned with improving urban education in under-performing city school districts.

The College Board's Functional Epistemology

In its promotional literature, the College Board describes its Scholastic Aptitude Test as a "globally recognized" exam that lets students "show colleges what you know and how well you can apply that knowledge" (College Board, "Why SAT?"). The test purports to measure critical reading ability, mathematical reasoning, and writing skills "that are taught every day in high school classrooms" (Ibid.). Materials for parents explain that the exam "tests how students think, solve problems, and communicate" (College Board, "What Do the Tests Really Measure?") and that the SAT Subject tests both demonstrate a student's "mastery of specific subjects" and "give students an additional opportunity to distinguish themselves and showcase their skills in a particular subject area" (Ibid.) The College Board also emphasizes the importance of standardized testing as a "protection" against comparative bias in the college admissions process,

while simultaneously cautioning that the exams it offers "do not measure motivation, creativity, or special talents" that contribute to higher education and life achievements (College Board, "Standardized Testing: The Big Picture"). Nonetheless, the College Board claims that, "test results provide the only consistent and objective measure of students' abilities and achievement in specific areas" because their exams are carefully designed "to measure specific content or skills" that students should have developed as part of their schooling (College Board, "Guidelines," 3). In this way, the College Board exams function as both measures and shapers of curricula: they assess how well academic programs have transmitted content and cultivated certain types of cognitive skills and they also designate what content and skills should be conveyed to students by schools.

The College Board's rhetoric suggests that it understands itself as an arbiter of conventional knowledge. While the content and skills measured by the College Board exams might not rise to the level of spiritual wisdom, they do represent a kind of communal understanding about what knowledge is valuable that echoes early Greek notions of "traditional wisdom" passed on from one generation to the next. As an institutional structure that mediates access to higher education, the College Board represents a contemporary form of scholasticism following in the Thomist tradition. Its exams assume that the average student is capable of observing phenomenon and growing in reasonable analysis of the data collected through observation to ever more sophisticated understandings of the world. The College Board's functional epistemology also mirrors the perspectives of liberal twentieth century Protestants in its elevation of the mind's ability to know what matters via scientific observation and analysis. By establishing what content and skills students need to master to excel on its exams, and by

encouraging schools to offer sequenced courses specifically designed to teach to the exams, the College Board endorses a hybrid socialization-developmental approach to education. Its emphasis on standardization of knowledge content and skill sets as a means of facilitating objective assessment presumes that how and what young people should know can be scientifically determined and socially transmitted in developmentally appropriate ways that apply to all children and youth fairly. While the College Board does acknowledge that SAT scores alone are not an adequate measure of whether a student can succeed in higher education or of the effectiveness of a particular teacher or school district, it seems confident that standardized testing is the best way to comparatively judge knowledge acquisition. The media and others are cautioned not to use aggregate scores to rank educators or schools, as the tests "are intended primarily as a measure of individual students" and contextual factors such as typical parental education, family histories, and "others of a less tangible nature could very well have a significant influence on average scores" (College Board, "Guidelines", 8). This caveat, however, is communicated alongside encouragement to use the scores as a significant factor in shaping curriculum development, strategic planning, and teacher evaluations. Given the widespread acceptance of the College Board's exam scores as indicative of educational excellence, its functional epistemological assumptions have attained hegemonic power in American culture.

Epistemological Assumptions of "No Child Left Behind"

The stated purpose of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is "to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic

assessments" (NCLB, 1439). Like the College Board rhetoric, the Act assumes a set of "common expectations" for student knowledge against which student achievement and school performance can be measured (NCLB, 1440). In amending the National Assessment of Educational Progress section of the National Education Statistics Act of 1994, No Child Left Behind dictates that student achievement levels be established by "identifying the knowledge that can be measured and verified objectively…based on the appropriate level of subject matter knowledge for grade levels to be assessed, or the age of the students" and "devising a national consensus approach" (NCLB, 1903). This approach combines a concern for promoting commonly held conceptions of ideas with a developmental focus on unfolding cognitive capabilities. The Act requires that states develop "challenging academic standards" in reading, mathematics, and science that apply equally to all students and that "specify what children are expected to know and be able to do; contain coherent and rigorous content; and encourage the teaching of advanced skills" (NCLB, 1445). Furthermore, states will describe three levels of student achievement in relation to these standards – basic, proficient, and advanced – and develop uniform resources and guidelines for ensuring that all students attain at least a proficiency level score on standardized achievement tests (Ibid.). States must also create measures that assess "continuous and substantial academic improvement for all students" annually (NCLB, 1446).

No Child Left Behind encourages states to develop and provide uniform instructional resources to assist local school districts and teachers in teaching to defined standards. While in theory the Act leaves to states the authority to establish these standards, language within No Child Left Behind describes specific components and content that states must include if they want to receive federal funding for their programs. For instance, the Act lists five "essential

components of reading instruction," defines "reading" in terms of "a complex system of deriving meaning from print that requires" six specific skill sets, and insists that teachers use approaches derived from "scientifically based reading research" (NCLB, 1550). Early reading programs must include another set of five specified components (NCLB, 1552), and language in two sections of the Act spells out requirements for economics education in terms of "teaching the basic principles of economics and promoting the concept of achieving financial literacy through the teaching of personal financial management skills (include the basic principles involved with earning, spending, saving, and investing)" (NCLB, 1781), helping students "to become more productive and informed citizens" (NCLB, 1848), and providing "entrepreneurial education" (NCLB, 1849). Another section devoted to character education provides a list of seven specific character traits recommended for inclusion and mandates that these programs connect with "state academic content standards" (NCLB, 1818-1819). In these ways, No Child Left Behind scripts the shape and content of children's learning in much the same way as the College Board, but via financial incentives to state education boards and local school districts rather than through higher education admissions gate-keeping.

The language of science also dominates in the Act. Instructions for program development frequently include phrases such as "clear objectives" (NCLB, 1819), "based on scientifically based research" (NCLB, 1601), "research-based cognitive and perceptual development" (NCLB, 1782), "a diagnostic-prescriptive model" (Ibid.), "rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures" (NCLB, 1550), and "empirical methods" (NCLB, 1551). In addition, No Child Left Behind is enthusiastic about "academic content standards" (NCLB, 1440, 1444, 1855) and "challenging academic content" (NCLB, 1440, 1445, 1601). One might argue that science has

become the new Moses, and that No Child Left Behind thus sanctions knowledge on the basis of its scientific antecedents much as Justine Martyr blessed Greek philosophy as a derivative of Mosaic wisdom. The Thomist ideal of perfect knowledge through scientific reasoning and the later Enlightenment concern for empirical evidence of objective ideals rest comfortably within the Act's framework. Given John Locke's philosophical influence on the United States' founders, it is not surprising that his fondness for scientific empiricism remains a hallmark of the American education system.

A State-Based Educational Epistemology

To comply with the funding requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act, most states revised their education standards after 2001. The Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) will serve as an example of a state-based document promoting an implicit epistemology for elementary and secondary education in the United States. The Virginia Board of Education asserts that its "Standards of Learning set reasonable targets and expectations for what teachers need to teach and students need to learn" (VBOE, "English SOL," i). The Board used a "series of public hearings" in conjunction with consultations involving "parents, teachers, education officials, and representatives of business and industry" (Ibid.), which suggests that the Standards are meant to represent a popular consensus about what constitutes knowledge. Each academic section (e.g. English, Mathematics, Science, History and Social Science, Economics and Personal Finance) is accompanied by a "Curriculum Framework" that attaches "essential understandings" and "essential knowledge, skills, and processes" to each standard (VBOE, "English – Grade 10," 9) and, in most cases, an "Enhanced Scope and Sequence" that either

suggests activities and resources or provides detailed lesson plans for implementing the SOL-based Curriculum Framework. While the materials repeatedly state that the SOL are meant to be neither prescriptive nor comprehensive, they also remind teachers and school administrators that the state's assessment process "requires that all Virginia school divisions prepare students to demonstrate achievement of the standards for elementary and middle school history and social science by the grade levels tested" (VDOE, "History," 2).

The "History and Social Science Standards of Learning" provide a clearer picture of how state expectations curtail local flexibility. The "Preface" to the History SOL explains that the standards are designed with concern for "the quantity of content that can be taught and learned effectively" and reflect "the key events and people…traditionally studied at grades K-3" and "crucial to understanding the concepts identified…for grades 4-12" (VDOE, "History," 1). The Curriculum Framework includes not only essential understandings, knowledge, and skills, but also the "essential questions" teachers and students should be asking to generate the outcomes scripted by the other categories. Laid out as a four column table, the Framework first dictates the understandings prescribed by the SOL, lists the question(s) second, outlines crucial knowledge components third, and describes the skills strengthened by this part of the curriculum fourth. A standard developed in the section on world history focuses on the Middle Ages and western Europe, particularly the spread of Catholicism during this time period.

Figure 1 (VDOE, "World History to 1500 Framework", 42)

Essential Understandings	Essential Questions	Essential Knowledge	Essential Skills
The Roman Catholic Church grew in importance after Roman authority	How and why did the Church grow in importance during the Middle Ages?	**Foundations of early medieval society** • Classical heritage of Rome	Identify major geographic features important to the study of

declined. It became the unifying force in western Europe. During the Middle Ages, the Pope anointed the Holy Roman Emperors, missionaries carried Christianity to the Germanic tribes, and the Church served the social, political, and religious needs of the people.		• Christian beliefs • Customs of Germanic tribes **Influence of the Roman Catholic Church** • Roman authority declined, while church authority grew. • Monasteries preserved Greco-Roman cultural achievements • Missionaries carried Christianity and Latin alphabet to Germanic tribes. • Pope anointed Charlemagne Holy Roman Emperor in 800 A.D. • Parish priests served religious and social needs of the people.	world history. (WHI.1e) Analyze trends in human migration and cultural interaction. (WHI.1e)

Note that the focus question is derived from the core knowledge designated by the SOL, rather than the reverse. What children should know thus takes on much greater importance than the questions that might arise in the midst of a conversation about world history. The attendant scope and sequence materials include suggested learning activities, a vocabulary handout, two timeline templates, and a set of "Sample Assessment Items" for use in course exams and quizzes (VDOE, "World History to 1500 Scope," 173). The sample essay questions include lists of terms and data that teachers should use to evaluate student responses in terms of the knowledge bits associated with the standard. While educators might choose to deviate from these plans or supplement their

students' study with other explorations of the church in the Middle Ages, they must also ensure that students can correctly answer the types of questions posed in the assessment resource or their students will be deemed ignorant of history, even if the students have a wealth of other historical knowledge at their fingertips.

The Virginia "Science Standards of Learning" provides the most explicit definition of what the state means by "understanding." Here the term "refers to various levels of knowledge application," which follow "systematic use" of a set of designated "inquiry skills" that constitute a "scientific methodology" (VDOE, "Science SOL," 4). Knowledge, then, is information generated via investigation, and understanding is therefore the application of this information to a task or problem. The state considers the acquisition of knowledge and understanding as ends in themselves, although a secondary purpose of investigation is "to preserve and enhance the quality of the human experience" (VDOE, "Science SOL," 1). This document also best illustrates the Thomistic leanings of contemporary learning standards in Virginia, for the goals of science education include not only the development of scientific reasoning and skills, but also engagement in moral reasoning. Children and youth are expected to develop "scientific dispositions and habits of mind" (which includes "respect for logic and rational thinking" and "demand for verification") and to "make informed decisions regarding contemporary issues" on the basis of such values as "respect for living things" and "personal responsibility" (VDOE, "Science SOL," 2). A similar combination of scientific and moral reasoning occurs under the "Economics and Personal Finance Standards of Learning" approved in November 2009, in which students explore both "basic economic principles" (VDOE, "Civics and Economics," 4) and how to capitalize on "their own human capital" and "practice weighing costs and benefits of options

when making choices about such things as careers" and other life decisions (VDOE, "Economics," 1). In these two documents are echoes of Enlightenment epistemologies as well, as students' minds are guided gradually toward commonly held ideas of truth presumed to society to be universal and unassailable.

The Local Epistemological Option

The education of contemporary children and youth is shaped not only by commercial and legislative influences, but also by voluntary associations of educators and school districts who band together to engage in research and exchange practical advice. Once such association is the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS), a 66-member urban schools group to which the city school district of my current hometown belongs. In 2003, Richmond Public Schools (RPS) asked the Council to assess the effectiveness of the district's educational strategies and offer recommendations for improvement. The report generated by this consultation, which has served as a foundational piece of school reform in Richmond, Virginia, provides a sense of how a local epistemology is framed by peer influences as well as its own context.

The Council of the Great City Schools analyzes 61 items to determine how effective a local school district's educational approaches are with regard to student achievement on SOL-based tests of knowledge. Each item is ranked on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, with 5 corresponding to what the Council considers best practices or strong characteristics. Figure 2 illustrates four sample items considered by Council consultants in assessing the Richmond Public Schools.

Figure 2 (CGCS, 92-93)

36. District has multiple curricula with	1	2	3	4	5	District adopts or develops uniform curriculum or framework

contrasting instructional approaches.						for instruction.
37. District's reading and math curriculum permits teachers to decide how to teach students.						District uses more prescriptive reading and math curriculum or tight framework.
43. District has no way to ensure that classroom teachers are covering the curriculum.						District has a formalized system (pacing guides) to ensure that teachers are covering the curriculum standards.
44. District has no formalized way to monitor implementation of the curriculum.						District closely monitors curriculum implementation through frequent visits to classrooms by curriculum leaders, principals, and other administrators.

The watchwords of the Council's Richmond Public Schools report are "standardization," "scientific," "alignment," and "accountability." The consultants employed in the study expressed concern about the lack of uniform approaches to instruction, skills assessment, and curriculum selection. They advised the Richmond Public Schools to "select and put in place a single, cohesive reading program that reflects the best scientific research" and to rework existing scope and sequence documents to provide more standardized district teaching resources (CGCS, 13). They urged selection of a district-wide reading program "based on scientifically based reading research (SBRR)" and using one of three recommended basal readers (CGCS, 43-44). Expressing dissatisfaction with the quality of the Virginia Department of Education SOL instructional materials, the consultants encouraged district officials to develop alternatives that are less "irregular" and less likely to encourage "teachers to alter the instructional sequence supported by the research and found in some of the district's textbooks" (CGCS, 31). They also

noted that the United States Department of Education does not consider some of the district's instructional strategies "scientifically-based" and advocated the replacement of those approaches (Ibid.). They complained of a lack of alignment between curriculum selection and academic achievement criteria, as well as between the district's "Curriculum Compass" (i.e. local curriculum framework) grade level components and "what research suggests about good curriculum design" (CGCS, 32). They recommended "vertical (pre-K to 12) alignment of the district's adopted textbooks, materials, and state performance standards" (CGCS, 44). The consultants also felt that Compass did not go far enough in stipulating which resources are most effective for teaching specific content and skills and how those materials should be implemented by teachers in the classroom (Ibid.). By standardizing curriculum and teaching methods, the consultants then believed that local educators – from the superintendent to principals to individual teachers – could realistically be held accountable for student achievement on statewide SOL tests via performance contracts tied to exam statistical outcomes (CGCS, 43).

Once again, we see the influences of Thomist and Enlightenment epistemologies on contemporary general education systems. Knowledge is a product of human reasoning toward rational concepts confirmed as true by scientific investigation and best approached via uniform methods of inquiry. Order and structure incline the mind to grasp objective truths and reinforce standardized skills necessary for efficient knowing. Variation in teaching methods, curricular pacing, and subject content undermine the timely acquisition of knowledge commonly believed necessary for "participation in the American dream" (CGCS, "Our Mission").

Religious Education in the Shadow of General Education

Curriculum developers for children's ministries have followed general education's lead in shaping resources focused on conveying pre-determined knowledge bits to children according to traditional notions of what children are capable of knowing or ought to know at any given age. A study of more than 100 published curricula available to mainstream Protestant churches between 1998 and 2002 demonstrated that half of them structured their lessons around a single point teachers were expected to convey to children as a "truth" to be learned, and several more conveyed a similar bias in the way they scripted the questions and prayers provided for the teacher's use (Yust, 9). As in the Virginia Curriculum Framework resources, where the concept of applicable understandings dictated essential questions, these children's ministries resources let their knowledge bits determine which biblical stories and catechism questions will be used in support of an objectified idea. Lesson preparation materials encourage teachers to treat curricula as vessels containing "content" to be conveyed to students. Scripted prayers are frequently brief introductions to or recapitulations of the "point" of the lesson and curriculum writers provide parenthetical answers to scripted questions so teachers can assess whether students are providing "correct" responses or need further instruction to "know" the right answer. Publishers reported that congregations want resources that provide volunteer teachers with close guidance to offset the anxiety that lay people do not know enough about the bible and faith to confidently teach children and youth (Yust, 16). This concern parallels the Council of the Great City School's implicit anxiety about general education teachers' competence to teach the "right" material without district-generated resources detailing content and methods.

A more recent (Fall 2009) review of a set of newly revised Presbyterian resources for children's and youth church school suggests that the earlier assessment of mainstream Protestant

materials still holds. *Wee Believe* for toddlers and preschoolers, and *We Believe* for Younger and Older Elementary children orient lessons toward a particular theme or moral point that children are expected to grasp by the end of the session. For young children, these knowledge bits are the concepts faith communities have traditionally considered essential ideas for early consumption: that the toddler or preschooler is God's child and loved by God, that God created the world, that children should love God and others, and that people in the bible (e.g. Moses, Samuel) were once children like them. The elementary materials focus on a "main idea" that is usually a bible "fact" or a story "take-away" point, and the background materials for teachers prepare them mostly in terms of what they need to know about the story themselves in order to emphasize the point. Furthermore, the main idea is identical across both elementary divisions, which implies not only that each story has only one "truth" to convey to children but also that the writers and editors assume similar levels of cognition over a five year age span (5-10 years) and expect all children to come to the same conclusions despite different life experiences. This lack of attention to children's developmental changes over time suggests that religious education materials may not echo the concern for progressive growth in knowledge of subject matter (i.e. movement from basic to proficient to advanced knowledge) emphasized by general education epistemologies, but be content with basic knowledge acquisition. It also suggests that content transmission, not skill development (e.g. biblical exegesis, theological reflection), is the primary focus of children's religious education.

Reclaiming Religious Intuition

What has been lost in contemporary educational versions of Thomistic and Enlightenment epistemologies is the role of revelation in knowing. As commercial entities, federal, state, and local governments, and advocacy groups tout scientific reasoning as the sole guide for children's general education and continue to develop educational systems designed to transmit knowledge in digestible bits measurable on standardized tests, religious educators must mine our own history for epistemologies that encourage a more balanced approach to formation in faith. We might begin by reclaiming the diverse concepts of knowledge suggested by the Hebrew scriptures: that knowledge can arise from unexpected places as well as in formal educational settings, that revelatory life experiences can form and reform our conceptions of what is true despite prolific empirical evidence to the contrary, and that knowledge is fundamentally a divine gift rather than a human attainment. We might revisit the Christological epistemologies of the apostle Paul, Bernard of Clairvaux, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Randolph Crump Miller, and feminist/womanist/mujerista theologians, and explore how more embodied ways of knowing help children encounter God incarnate in their world. We might explore epistemologies of illumination: Augustine's understanding of wisdom as divine illumination of the intellect through contemplation, Benedict's reliance on illumination through participation in "a school for the Lord's service" (Fry, 18), Cotton Mather's trust in the illuminative powers of study, Quaker reliance on inward illumination prompted by communal discourse, and Jonathan Edward's belief in God's illumination via religious affections. Each of these epistemologies calls for the cultivation of religious intuition as an essential way of knowing God.

Taken together with a post-Enlightenment appreciation for the rational powers of the mind, a re-embrasure of religious intuition expands our sense of what children can and need to

know. Biblical literacy becomes more than an ability to accurately name the books of the bible in order, match biblical characters with their accomplishments or character traits, repeat verses traditionally identified as significant, and enumerate a series of important biblical themes. Knowing the bible also involves praying the scriptures alongside one's study of them, listening for a contemporary Word among the words read, engaging others in contemplative consideration of the meaning of a text for personal and communal vocations, returning again and again to passages with the expectation that something more will be communicated by yet another encounter. As Karl Barth wrote, "Theological work can be done only in the indissoluble unity of prayer and study. Prayer without study would be empty. Study without prayer would be blind" (Barth, 171). Encouraging the cultivation of religious intuition in children revives the religious education's historic valuation of prayer as a teaching tool – not in the didactic way prayer is often used in children's ministries curricula, but in a more authentic form of prayer as a locus of divine revelation.

Is Resistance Futile?

The hegemonic power of general education's rational epistemology creates a formidable hurdle for religious education to surmount. When children are acculturated in general educational systems that view knowledge as pieces of data conveyed by scientifically validated, universalized methods and subject to standardized assessment, enculturating them in alternative religious education systems requires more than an hour a week in a formal church school class. Congregations and families will need to partner in creating time and spaces for children to experience open-ended exploration of the scriptures and practice contemplative forms of

engagement with the bible and faith statements of their tradition. Publishers will need to provide new curricular forms that shape learning around children's questions and communal discovery of "experimental" truths for ongoing study and contemplation. Traditional wisdom about what children can and should know at specific ages needs to be re-examined in terms of both our careful observation of children's intuitive ways of knowing and our own prayer contemplation of what knowledge of God truly is. Since children are unlikely to spend more time in congregational settings, religious educators need to move into other arenas inhabited by children and invite explorations of God's presence and activity in a soccer game, school studies, video gaming, and other aspects of daily life. We also need to raise questions publically about the sufficiency of standardized knowledge for creative participation in a diverse world that is both explicable in scientific terms and ever resistant to absolute explanations because of the enduring mysteries that refuse to conform to human expectations.

How will our children know God? Not via a standardized curriculum that prepares them for a confirmation class test or a set of church school lessons that reflect the general education epistemologies of manageable bits of knowledge rationally transmitted and received, but by participation in communities and households of faith open to the revelation of God that illuminates heart, mind, soul, and strength. The compelling task for twenty-first century religious educators is to help congregations and families resist cultural epistemologies that hinder spiritual wisdom and cultivate religious intuition as an alternative way of knowing the One who gifted humanity with intelligence and inner light.

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