

# Faith and Rationality: A Defense of Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology

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*“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.”*

– St. Paul<sup>2</sup>

Belief in God is the heart of the Christian religion – as it is of Judaism and Islam. The field of religious epistemology studies nature of theistic beliefs. This essay is concerned with two interrelated questions from this field. First, what criteria must be met for belief in God to be warranted? Second, can Christian theism provide a plausible model under which these criteria are met? These questions will be addressed over three sections.<sup>3</sup>

Section 1 will present the two dominant positions held in contemporary religious epistemology.<sup>4</sup> The first view, classical foundationalism, argues that for theistic belief to be warranted it must be based upon sufficient evidence. Proponents of this view who believe the evidence for God is insufficient raise what is known as the evidentialist objection, charging the theist with intellectual irresponsibility. The second view, known as reformed epistemology, argues that theistic belief can be warranted by virtue of being properly basic, that is, belief in God can be entirely right, rational, reasonable, and proper without any evidence at all. I will argue that classical foundationalism is false on the grounds that it is self-referentially incoherent. Furthermore, I will argue that the reformed position is both a sound and plausible conception of warrant.

Section 2 will show that full-blooded Christian belief can be warranted. The Aquinas/Calvin Model proposed by Alvin Plantinga meets the epistemic criteria for warrant, set out by the reformed position, by nature of a faculty or mechanism whereby we acquire true

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<sup>1</sup> I am much indebted to Dr. Dana Nelkin for her helpful comments and wise council in the development of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Romans 1:18-19

<sup>3</sup> The works that furthered my understanding of this topic include:

- (i) Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Alvin Plantinga (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1983) 16 - 94.
- (ii) Alvin Plantinga, “Is Belief in God Properly Basic,” *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, ed. Douglas Geivett (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 133 - 142.
- (iii) Alvin Plantinga, “Religious Belief Without Evidence,” *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, ed. Louis Pojman (Belmont, Wadsworth Thomson Learning, 2003), 414 – 428.
- (iv) Anthony Flew, “The Presumption of Atheism,” *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, ed. Douglas Geivett (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 19-32.
- (v) Michael Martin, “A Critique of Plantinga’s Religious Epistemology,” *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, ed. Louis Pojman (Belmont, Wadsworth Thomson Learning, 2003), 429 – 435.
- (vi) Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1993) Ch. 1, 12.
- (vii) Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2000) Ch. 5 – 10.

<sup>4</sup> For further readings in this field see *Contemporary Perspective on Religious Epistemology* ed. Douglas Geivett.

beliefs. This faculty, known as the *sensus divinitatis*, is corrupted by the ravages of sin and healed by faith instilled in us by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Section 3 will be devoted to answering possible objections to Plantinga's Model. The two objections when presented together form a dilemma. The first horn presented by Freud and Marx argue that Christianity is not warranted because it is formed by disordered cognitive processes or processes that are not aimed at the production of true belief. The second horn presented by Martin argues that even if Christianity is shown to be warranted we will be unwillingly thrown into epistemic relativism.

## §1 Religious Epistemology

When studying the nature of religious belief a number of questions inevitably arise. Must one need evidence to be rational in believing in God? Can belief in God be taken as properly basic? What conception of warrant appeals to the most valuable epistemic states of affairs? I propose to discuss these questions in the following section.

### §1.1 The Evidentialist Objection<sup>5</sup>

Philosophers from W.K. Clifford to Bertrand Russell to Anthony Flew<sup>6</sup> have argued that belief in God is irrational or intellectually irresponsible on the basis of insufficient evidence. This is formally known as the evidentialist objection to belief in God. Before investigating this claim two questions must be addressed. First, what is meant by belief in God? Second, what is the nature of the God whose existence is being proposed?

First, for the purposes of this paper theistic belief will be construed as "belief *in* God" rather than merely "believing *that* God exists." The phrase "belief in God" will be used as a synonym for "belief that there is such a person as God." Belief *in* God is not at all the same as believing *that* God exists. To believe that God exists is simply to assert that a certain proposition, namely, God exists, is true. On the other hand, believing in God is much more than accepting a proposition. Believing in God means trusting God, accepting God, accepting his purposes, committing one's life to him, and living in his presence. This distinction can be found in the book of James where it is noted that the devils, who do not believe *in* God and oppose his ways, believe *that* God exist, and they tremble.<sup>7</sup> Believing in God involves more than accepting the proposition that God exists. But if it is more than that, it is also at least that. Therefore, you cannot believe in God without believing that God exists.

Second, belief in God is taken as the affirmation that a certain special sort of being exists. Philosophers such as John Hick have suggested that whenever we use the word "God" we are referring to a mental or imaginative construct. But this is certainly not the case. When a Christian asserts that God created the world, are they really claiming that an imaginative construct created the world? Surely not. This paper will define God as the being who acts, holds beliefs, and has aims and purposes. Furthermore, this being is immaterial, perfect in goodness, knowledge, power, and is such that the world depends on him for its existence.

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<sup>5</sup> *Faith and Rationality*, 16-39.

<sup>6</sup> At age 81 Anthony Flew, a British philosophy professor and leading champion of atheism for more than half a century, became a theist. Flew no longer sees the evidence for theism as insufficient after findings made in recent research in the field of intelligent design. The first formal account of his outlook will be introduced in his *God and Philosophy* scheduled for released in 2005.

<sup>7</sup> James 2:19

Evidentialist objections to belief in God have most popularly come in two forms. The first charges the theist with contradictory beliefs. In other words, the atheologian is arguing that theism is internally inconsistent. Both the problem of omnipotence and the problem of omniscience are arguments of this form.<sup>8</sup> The second argues that the existence of God, although not impossible, is improbable. The problem of evil<sup>9</sup> is the best example of an argument of this form.

At the heart of the evidentialist objection is the belief that the strength of one's belief ought always to be proportional to the strength of the evidence for that belief. Hume states this when he says that a "wise man ... proportions his belief to the evidence."<sup>10</sup> W.K. Clifford affirmed this in his famous statement: "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."<sup>11</sup> Anthony Flew, in his widely influential essay "The Presumption of Atheism"<sup>12</sup> argues that the debate over the existence of God should rightly begin with the sort of premises which both the affirmative and negative sides can properly appeal in arguing their case. Therefore, when arguing for the existence of God, the theist cannot appeal to premises asserting God's existence. It is also true, however, that the debate cannot start from the assumption that God does not exist (atheism in the ordinary sense). What follows is that there is both a presumption of atheism as well as a presumption of aatheism. This seems correct. However, not everyone agrees with Flew. According to Michael Scriven if all the arguments for the existence of God fail, the only rational posture is to make the negative assertion that no such being as God exists. Atheism is therefore obligatory in the absence of any evidence for God's existence. The difficulty with Scriven's argument lies in an unwarranted assumption regarding positive existential hypotheses. In other words, Scriven does not treat the proposition (1) God exists, in the same way he treats, (2) God does not exist. He claims that if there is no evidence for (1) then the only rational course is to believe its denial, namely, proposition (2). But of course he does not propose the same treatment for (2). He does not suggest that if there is no evidence for (2) that we should be rationally obligated to believe its denial, namely (1). It is hard to see how Scriven's claim is anything more than intellectual imperialism.

In summary, there are many different valuable epistemic states of affairs and different conceptions of warrant to appeal to these values. The evidentialist objection rest upon a commitment to the foundationalist principle that adequate evidence is a necessary condition for warranted belief. But why believe such a thing? Must this hold for all beliefs? Is it impermissible to believe in God without evidence, proof, or argument at all? Surely some propositions are properly basic, accepted without evidence. Why not belief in God? In the next section I will argue that the foundationalist conception of warrant is false on the grounds that it is self-referentially incoherent.

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<sup>8</sup> For a response to the problem of omnipotence see Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* (Ithica, Cornell University Press, 1967), 168. For a response to the problem of omniscience see Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 66-72.

<sup>9</sup> For a response to the problem of evil see Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 1-75.

<sup>10</sup> Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section X: "Of Miracles".

<sup>11</sup> See W.K. Clifford's *The Ethics of Belief*.

<sup>12</sup> Flew, 19-32.

## §1.2 The Collapse of Classical Foundationalism <sup>13</sup>

According to classical foundationalism some propositions are properly basic and some are not. Those that are not are rationally accepted only on the basis of evidence that must trace back to what is properly basic. Furthermore, the existence of God is claimed to not be among the propositions that are properly basic. Therefore, theistic belief is only rationally acceptable if the believer has evidence for it. The fundamental principle of classical foundationalism can be stated as follows:

(3) A proposition  $p$  is properly basic for a person  $S$  if and only if  $p$  is either self-evident to  $S$  or incorrigible for  $S$  or evident to the sense for  $S$ .

According to the classical foundationalist,  $S$  is rational in accepting proposition (3) only if either (3) is properly basic for him, or he believes (3) on the basis of propositions that are basic for him and support (3). If  $S$  knows some support for (3) from propositions that are self-evident, evident to the sense, or incorrigible, he will be able to provide a good argument whose premises are self-evident, evident to the sense, or incorrigible, and whose conclusion is (3). As far as I know the foundationalist has not provided such an argument. It appears that the foundationalist does not know of any support for (3) from propositions that are properly basic. Therefore, (3) is not properly basic for  $S$ . Moreover,  $S$  is self-referentially inconsistent in accepting (3) seeing as how he accepts (3) as basic despite the fact that it does not meet the conditions for proper basicity that (3) itself lays down.

In conclusion, the evidentialist objection to belief in God argues that there is an obligation to try to not believe in God without evidence. This objection is founded upon classical foundationalism which states that a proposition  $p$  is properly basic for a person  $S$  if and only if  $p$  is either self-evident to  $S$  or incorrigible for  $S$  or evident to the sense for  $S$ . This section has shown the foundationalist principle is self-referentially incoherent, giving us strong reason to reject it. By rejecting this principle we are then led to reject classical foundationalism and the evidentialist objection that rides upon it. But, what then is a philosopher to believe? What conception of warrant should we use to understand the nature of theistic belief? In the next section I propose Alvin Plantinga's reformed epistemology as a sound and plausible conception for warrant.

## §1.3 Reformed Epistemology <sup>14</sup>

According to reformed epistemology a belief  $p$  is properly basic for  $S$  if and only if  $S$  accepts  $p$  in the basic way and furthermore  $p$  has warrant for  $S$ . A belief is basic if it is not accepted on the evidential basis of other propositions. But what about warrant? What is it about warrant that distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief. Plantinga has three criteria that must be met, necessary conditions if you will, for a belief to be warranted. Each criterion calls attention to different epistemic values that are widely held.

First, the belief must be produced by properly functioning cognitive faculties.<sup>15</sup> In other words, my cognitive equipment, my belief-forming and belief maintaining apparatus or powers

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<sup>13</sup> *Faith and Rationality*, 47 – 63.

<sup>14</sup> *Faith and Rationality*, 63 – 91.

<sup>15</sup> Proper function here does not necessarily imply having been created by God or some other conscious agent. It is possible that undirected evolution has somehow furnished us with a design plan. For a complete model of theistic design see William Dembski's *Design Revolution*.

must be free from malfunction. The notion of proper functioning is one we regularly employ. We understand the physician's intentions when we are prescribed synthetic thyroxin after being told that our thyroid is not functioning properly. There is a way things are supposed to work, and when they do not functioning in that manner, we can label them as being dysfunctional, damaged, or abnormal.

Second, these faculties must function in a congenial epistemic environment. For example, a car might function properly on the highway, despite the fact that it will not run well on the moon or under water. Similarly our cognitive faculties need a congenial environment to allow our beliefs formed by those faculties to be warranted. A person may have perfect 20/20 eye sight, free of cataracts or any defects. However, let us imagine we place that person in a hologram chamber and they proceed to form a belief that there is a table in the hologram chamber. This belief would not be warranted because although their eye sight is free of defects the beliefs formed by those faculties may be led astray due to an environment that is conducive to deceiving the subject.

At this point comments and qualifications must be made. First, how well must our cognitive faculties work to be considered properly functioning? Second, how similar must the environment be to my epistemic powers for which they were designed? With regards to the first question it is clear that faculties need not be functioning in absolute perfection to provide warrant. For instance, if someone's sight is 19/20 instead of 20/20 we would still be willing to grant their beliefs regarding what they see warrant. With regards to the second, we can imagine environments which are misleading but do not deprive me of warrant. For instance, if I am in a world in which I am aware of the ways in which I am being misled and I compensate for the malfunction. This would be so in a world where I am aware of the fact that everything that looks square is actually circle. What are we to make of this vagary? The vagueness with this notion of warrant varies with the vagueness of the independent notions, namely proper function and congenial environment. If warrant and proper function are properly tied together then we may expect that they will waiver together. Thus the ambiguity is expected and unproblematic.

Third, cognitive faculties must work according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth. There is something like a set of specifications for a well formed, properly functioning human being. This blueprint details how our cognitive systems, faculties, non-cognitive systems, and organs are supposed to work. Let us call this the "design plan."<sup>16</sup> Two examples of proper function according to a design plan would be, for example, seeing the truth of *modus ponens* or finding yourself forming the belief that there is large tree in front of you when standing in a forest. If our faculties work properly but are aimed at something aside from the truth, happiness or procreation for instance, we have reason to question the warrant of the belief held. Furthermore, if the belief is aimed at truth but is unsuccessful, we also have reason to question the warrant given to the belief being proposed.

In a nutshell, a belief has warrant for a person *S* only if that belief is produced in *S* by cognitive faculties functioning properly in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for *S*'s kind of cognitive faculties, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth. I believe this conception of warrant is both sound and plausible. In the next section I will discuss how full-blooded Christian beliefs meet these criteria, thereby providing the believer with warrant.

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<sup>16</sup> Due to the scope of this paper I will not develop in detail the nature of proper function with respect to human agents. However, I will reference my thoughts to: *Warrant and Proper Function*, 42 – 176.

## §2 Warranted Christian Belief

Alvin Plantinga, in the sixth chapter of *Warranted Christian Belief*, proposes a model of theistic belief having warrant. To give a model of a proposition or state of affairs *S* is to show how it *could be* that *S* is true or actual. Moreover, if the model is shown to be true then so is the target proposition. By claiming that his model is epistemically possible, Plantinga is asserting that his model is consistent with the general body of knowledge which the participants of the discussion would agree upon. The notion of epistemic possibility presented is much stronger than broadly logical possibility. For a proposition *p* to be epistemically possible is to assert that we can scarcely know that *p* or its denial are false. For instance, obvious falsehoods such as *the population of China is less than a thousand* are logically possible, however, they are epistemically impossible because we can know that the proposition is false. Therefore, in proposing his model, Plantinga sets out to show that theistic belief, and more specifically full-blooded Christian belief, can be warranted. The ingredients included in full-blooded Christian belief must be specified. According to Plantinga this belief system includes the affirmation of the following propositions: God created the heavens and the earth, that he created human beings in his own image, that human beings fell ruinously into sin, from which they require salvation, that in response God graciously sent Jesus Christ, the divine son of God, who took on our flesh, suffered, and died as an atonement for our sins, and rose from the dead, thus enabling us fallen human beings to have eternal life with God.

### §2.1 The Aquinas/Calvin Model<sup>17</sup>

According to the Aquinas/Calvin Model (A/C Model hereafter) belief in God is warranted by nature of a faculty or mechanism whereby we acquire true beliefs. Calvin describes this cognitive mechanism as the *sensus divinitatis* (SD hereafter). SD is a disposition or set of dispositions to form theistic beliefs in various circumstances, in response to the sorts of conditions or stimuli that trigger the working of the divine sense. These situations include but are not limited to beholding the marvelous impressive beauty of the night's sky or the subtle play of sunlight on a flower. There are six key features to the A/C Model.

First, natural knowledge of God is not arrived at by inference or argument but in a much more immediate way. In the way that the beliefs just arise in us the SD resembles perception, memory, and *a priori* belief. The beliefs are not arrived at by inference but rather are triggered spontaneously by the proper conditions. SD may also enable us to see the truth of premises in a theistic argument or the order and design in nature. This natural knowledge is also sufficient to render humans guilty of failing to worship, obey, and commit ourselves to God.

Second, the theistic belief produced by the SD is properly basic in two ways. First, by forming beliefs directly SD allows the belief holder to accept the belief on a non-evidential basis. Second, the believer is justified in holding the belief in a basic way by responsibly keeping to his epistemic duties.

Third, another way to interpret that theistic belief is properly basic is to say "*p* is properly basic for *S* in this sense if and only if *S* accepts *p* in the basic way, and furthermore *p* has warrant for *S*, accepted in that way."<sup>18</sup> Warrant can be gained when a belief is being a) produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly in a b) congenial epistemic environment according to a

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<sup>17</sup> *Warranted Christian Belief*, 167 – 198.

<sup>18</sup> *Warranted Christian Belief*, 178.

c) design plan successfully aimed at truth. A belief may be accepted in a basic way yet lack warrant. This can occur if any one of the three criteria for warrant is not met. For instance, (a) can fail to be met if the belief is formed due to cognitive malfunctions or to a cognitive faculty being impeded by such conditions as rage, lust ambition or grief. Criterion (c) can fail to be met if the belief is formed from a design plan aimed at a non-truth providing mechanism such as wish-fulfillment.<sup>19</sup> And so on and so forth. According to the A/C model theistic belief produced by SD can be properly basic with respect to warrant.

Fourth, there is a distinction to be drawn between the Holy Spirit and SD. Unlike the Holy Spirit, SD is part of our original epistemic endowment. The Holy Spirit is part of a special response to our fallen condition into which human kind has precipitated itself. It is a very special type of cognitive instrument or agency that is belief producing.<sup>20</sup>

Fifth, Plantinga argues that we may have either indirect or direct perception of God. Indirect perception comes in a mediated form when we perceive something else, for instance, the night sky. Direct perception of God can happen through other manifestations of the SD in situations of guilt, danger, or gratitude. However, the SD does not necessarily involve the perception of God. In other words, the operation of the SD “will always involve the presence of some sort of experience even if sensuous imagery is not always present.”<sup>21</sup> Our experience may also be doxastic, formed by the entertainment a proposition.

Sixth, our natural knowledge of God has been compromised, weakened, reduced, smothered, overlaid, or impeded by sin and its consequences. The knowledge of God provided by the SD, prior to faith and regeneration by the Holy Spirit, is narrowed in scope and partially suppressed. Sin due to one cause or another, be it our original fallen nature or willful acts of disobedience, may disease and thus partly or wholly disable the faculty.

According to the A/C Model God created human beings in his own image. This involves being persons with an intellect and a will. The intellect is an ability to have beliefs and understanding while the will is an ability to have affections in forming and accomplishing your aims and intentions. This is known as the *broad* image of God. The narrow image involves having an extensive and intimate knowledge of God and his sound affections including a gratitude for God’s goodness as provided by the SD. Furthermore, our cognitive faculties including the SD are capable of being corrupted. For instance, our sense of hearing becomes impaired when we are frequently exposed to loud noises. The next section is devoted to investigating the nature of sin and its consequences on the SD.

### **§2.1 Sin and Its Consequences**<sup>22</sup>

Sin is defined as that which is contrary to God’s will. When it comes to sin the agent is responsible only if he recognizes that what he does is sin, or is culpable in failing to recognize that it is sin. Furthermore, there is also the condition of being “in sin” for which we are not culpable. This state, most commonly referred to as “original sin,” is instilled in us from birth. The doctrine of original sin has the strongest claim to empirical verifiability by the testimony of wars, cruelty, and general hatefulness that have characterized human history. Sin has both cognitive and affective consequences.

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<sup>19</sup> These objections as formulated by Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud will be explored further in section 3.

<sup>20</sup> The role of the Holy Spirit in the production of faith and regeneration will be explored further in section 2.3.

<sup>21</sup> *Warranted Christian Belief*, 183.

<sup>22</sup> *Warranted Christian Belief*, 199 – 240.

The cognitive effects of sin include a sort of blindness, imperceptiveness, dullness, and stupidity. This not only prevents the victim from loving God but also prevents him from seeing what is worth loving and what is worth hating, what should be sought and what should be eschewed. It compromises their knowledge of fact and value. The noetic effects of sin are concentrated with respect to our knowledge of other people, ourselves, and of God. First, my hatred or distaste for others may lead me to find them as inferior and of less worth than myself. Furthermore, I may completely misunderstand someone else's attitude towards me, suspecting them of trying to do me in, when in fact there is nothing to the suggestion. Second, due to pride, I may, without thinking, come to assume that I am the center of the universe. I would be vastly exaggerating the importance of what happens to me as opposed to others. Third, our knowledge of the character of God and his love towards us may be smothered. This knowledge may also be transformed into a resentful thought that God is to be feared and mistrusted seeing him as indifferent or even malignant.

Sin also has affective consequences. Our own personal gratification may trump our yearning to seek the kingdom and glory of God. In my prideful desire for autonomy and self-sufficiency I can come to resent the presence of someone upon whom I depend for my every breath. I want to be autonomous and beholden to no one. This is perhaps the deepest root of the condition of sin. It is in a sense a madness of the will by which we to some degree know what is to be loved yet perversely turn away from what ought to be loved.

The condition of sin involves damage to the SD but not complete obliteration. The correlative work of the Bible, Holy Spirit and faith work to repair, gradually or suddenly, to a greater or lesser extent, the ravages of sin. The next section investigates the nature of specifically Christian beliefs such as the trinity, incarnation, Christ's resurrection, atonement, forgiveness of sins, salvation, regeneration, and eternal life.

### **§2.3 Internal Instigation of the Holy Spirit**<sup>23</sup>

According to the A/C Model human beings were created in the image of God, built with an intellect and a set of affections guided by a divine sense aimed purely at God and truth. Man freely disobeyed God, incurred the first scar to the divine sense, and passed on that scar to the following generations. God has provided a remedy for sin and its ruinous effects, a means of salvation from sin and restoration to his favor and fellowship. This remedy is available in the life, atoning suffering and death, and resurrection of his divine Son, Jesus Christ. Salvation involves among other things rebirth and regeneration, a process than involves a restoration and repair of the image of God in us. Furthermore, God provided a way to inform human beings of many times and places of the scheme of salvation he has graciously made available. According to the A/C Model these beliefs are typically taken as basic, that is, they are not accepted by way of argumentation or on the evidential basis of other propositions. Although some do form their beliefs by way of evidence, the A/C Model shows how belief in God can be warranted aside from evidence. Plantinga argues that three things are involved in a believer coming to accept the great things of the gospel.

First, there is scripture, the Bible, the collection of writings of human authors, but specially inspired by God in such a way that he can be said to be its principle author. At some point we encounter these scriptural teachings by hearing the gospel preached, or are told by our parents, or read the text itself. At this point what is said simply seems right. These teachings ring

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<sup>23</sup> *Warranted Christian Belief*, 241 – 289.

true to us, compelling us to say “Yes, that seems right. That is the truth of the matter.” Or something about the propositions may ring true. For instance, the fact that they are inspired will be purely evident and clear. Scripture is most importantly a message, a communication from God to humankind. It is as much of a testimony as a letter you receive from a friend. However, it is different from ordinary testimony in that in this case the one writing the letter also does something special to enable you to believe its special contents.

Second, God has sent the Holy Spirit, promised by Christ before his death and resurrection, who enables us to see the truth of what is proposed. A principle work of the Holy Spirit with respect to us human beings is the production of the gift of faith. The internal invitation of the Holy Spirit is therefore a source of belief, a cognitive process that produces in us the belief in the main lines of the Christian story.

Third, faith is that “firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence towards us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”<sup>24</sup> It is matter of the will and affections. It is a repair of the madness of the will that is at the heart of sin. Faith enables us to see the truth of the main lines of the Christian gospel as set forth in Scripture.

### §3 Objections

The A/C Model is intended to show how specifically Christian beliefs can have warrant. Objections to this model come in two forms. First, the warrant of Christianity is put into question. This form of objection is most often attributed to Marx and Freud who argued that Christian belief lacks warrant because it is formed by disordered cognitive processes or processes that are not aimed at the production of true belief. This is an attempt to give a naturalistic explanation of religious belief, explanations that do not involve the truth of the beliefs in question or the truths of any other supernatural beliefs. To provide this criticism is to in some way attempt to discredit religious belief, cast doubt on it, and show that it is not epistemically respectable. The criticism here would be that Christian belief is irrational. Second, it is argued that by granting Christianity warrant we are led into epistemic relativism and other absurd consequences. These objections come in the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*, granting the truth of the opponent’s premises and showing how if the logic is followed through we will be led to accept absurd conclusions. The most prominent objection of this form, known as the Son of the Great Pumpkin Objection, was put forward by Michael Martin. These objections in conjunction with their replies will be explored further below.

#### §3.1 Christian Belief is Not Warranted<sup>25</sup>

Going back to Plato and Aristotle there is an assumption that there are cognitive or rational powers, or faculties, or virtues. These functions like any other instrument can work properly or improperly, function well or malfunction. There is a presumption of reliability for properly functioning faculties. We are inclined to take it that these faculties for the most part deliver true beliefs. For instance, according to Richard Dawkins “It is absolutely safe to say that if you meet someone who claims not to believe in evolution, that person is ignorant, stupid or insane (or wicked, but I’d rather not consider that).”<sup>26</sup> Dawkins believes that for anyone whose

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<sup>24</sup> *Warranted Christian Belief*, 201.

<sup>25</sup> *Warranted Christian Belief*, 135 – 166.

<sup>26</sup> *Warranted Christian Belief*, 150.

cognitive faculties are functioning properly the truth of evolution should be utterly clear and obvious.

There are three ways in which a belief can fail to be a proper deliverance of rational faculties. First, it can be produced by a cognitive malfunction. For instance, my coming to believe that there is a ghost in front of me because of expired medicine I had taken. Second, beliefs that arise by cognitive processes aimed at something other than truth. Plantinga cites the beliefs produced by evolution as an example of this. According to evolution our faculties are aimed at reproduction, and not necessarily the truth.<sup>27</sup> Third, beliefs that are aimed or faculties whose function has been impeded and overridden by lust, ambition, greed, selfishness, grief, fear, low-self esteem, and other emotional conditions. A widow who forms the belief that life is not worth living after losing her husband may count as an example in which someone fails to meet the proper deliverances of reason due to extreme grief. Freud and Marx argue that theistic beliefs are not produced by properly functioning cognitive faculties aimed at truth. In other words, they are arguing that Christian belief lacks warrant.

Karl Marx argues that religion is produced by cognitive faculties that are malfunctioning. He cites the cause of this cognitive malfunction to be social dysfunction and dislocation. Religious belief arises from a perverted world consciousness. Our failure to see the truth is the result of a lack of mental and emotional health. The believer is therefore in an etymological sense insane. Sigmund Freud argued that theistic belief is an illusion with its origin in wish-fulfillment, thus making it not aimed at truth production. Freud believes it is within our power to resist this illusion and that there is something condemnable, something intellectually irresponsible, in failing to do so. These wishes enable us to get along in this cold heartless world into which we ourselves were thrown.

An important point to note is that these objections, aside from appearances, do not fall prey to the genetic fallacy. The genetic fallacy is used when someone argues that a belief is not *true* because the method in which the belief was acquired was improper. For instance, this fallacy would question the truth of the proposition “ $2+2=4$ ” just because someone came to believe that proposition after falling and hitting their head on concrete. The reason the complaints of Freud and Marx do not commit the genetic fallacy is because they are questioning the warrant of a belief and not the truth of the belief. The origin of a belief is relevant to *warrant* of a belief but not its *truth*.

There are two criteria that the Freud and Marx complaints must meet to be successful criticisms. First, they must show that theistic belief really does arise from a mechanism of wish-fulfillment or due to a cognitive malfunction. Second, it must show that this particular operation of that mechanism is not aimed at the production of true belief. The objections fail to meet the first criterion because much of theistic belief goes contrary to our general wishes. For instance, would we wish up a God that judges people and condemns some to hell? Wouldn't our wish be that God judges no one and that God turns a blind eye to our inequity? Freud may respond by pointing out that specific doctrines may not arise due to wish-fulfillment but belief systems as a whole arise in that manner. So although one may object to a certain doctrine, for instance, the doctrine of original sin, one may really be drawn towards a different doctrine, for instance, the doctrine of salvation. And by favoring salvation over sin we would choose to accept Christianity in its entirety. This seems at best highly speculative. Freud would need to bear the burden of proof to show that a) the belief holder is favoring certain doctrines over others and b) that is their

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<sup>27</sup> *Warrant and Proper Function*, 216 – 229.

over-arching reason for holding the entire set of beliefs. Furthermore, Freud would need form an explanation of why people would not just form new sects of religions that do not involve the objectionable doctrines. And even if these sects are created, why aren't more people in them? The dialectic rages on, however, I am still left unconvinced by Freud's charges.

The objections also fail to meet the second criterion because it may be the case that wish fulfillment is a mechanism aimed at truth. If wish-fulfillment is the mechanism used by God to draw us near to Him it would be the case that it forms a true belief, namely, that God exists. Perhaps God designed us to know that he is present and loves us by way of creating us with a strong desire for him. If this is the case, then unbelief would be the result of an improperly functioning wish-fulfillment faculty. According to the A/C Model it is unbelief that is a result of dysfunction, brokenness, failure to function properly, or the impedance of rational faculties.<sup>28</sup> By not meeting these two criteria Freud and Marx have failed to show that theistic belief lacks warrant. The next section will discuss the second form of objection raised to Plantinga's A/C Model.

### §3.2 Christian Belief is Warranted<sup>29</sup>

According to the A/C model, belief in God and belief in the central tenets of the Christian faith can be rational and warranted without evidence. Moreover, theistic beliefs can be warranted without being believed on the evidential basis of other beliefs; they can have warrant that they don't get by way of warrant transfer from other beliefs. In this respect, they are like memory beliefs, perceptual beliefs, *a priori* beliefs and so on. The beliefs of the Christian faith, on this suggestion, are a proper starting point for thought. In other words these beliefs are properly basic, and properly basic with respect to warrant. This section will cover four objections in the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*. These objections attempt to show that if Christian belief is granted warrant, multiple absurd consequences will follow. I will argue that these objections, although clever and poignant, fail to make a convincing case against Plantinga's reformed epistemology.

First, if belief in God is properly basic with respect to warrant, then objections and arguments will not be relevant to it. It is claimed that belief in God will be beyond rational scrutiny and will be insulated from objections and defeaters. But do we have any reason to believe this? I do not believe so. Imagine that you tell me that you went to the Grand Tetons this summer. I would then acquire the belief that you did so and hold it in a basic way. But a few days later your wife tells me that the fact is you went to Wind Rivers, which, she says, you always confuse with the Tetons. In addition, every time I see you, you cannot stop talking about the glories of Gannett Peak (which is in Wind Rivers). I would then no longer believe that you went to the Tetons, despite the fact that I originally formed the belief in a basic way. So it is not true, in general, that if a belief is held in the basic way, then it is immune to argument, objection, or defeat.

Second, if belief in God can be properly basic, then so can any other belief, no matter how bizarre. In other words, if belief in God can be properly basic, then all bets are off and

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<sup>28</sup> Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this, and they said to him, "Are we also blind?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains. – John 1:39-41.

<sup>29</sup> *Warranted Christian Belief*, 324 – 356.

anything goes. It would follow that belief in the Great Pumpkin who returns every Halloween to the most sincere pumpkin patch is properly basic with respect to warrant. This objection is referred to as The Great Pumpkin Objection. Is it reasonable to believe that if some kinds of belief are properly basic with respect to warrant that all other kinds are? Certainly not. Even if the extended A/C model is correct, it does not follow that these other beliefs are properly basic with respect to warrant.

Third, Michael Martin argues that if Christian belief is warranted, any proposition, no matter how fantastic, would have to be accepted as properly basic. Someone who took any proposition  $p$  in the basic way could legitimately claim that if  $p$  was properly basic with respect to rationality, that is, it can both be rationally accepted and accepted in the basic way. In any possible community and with any possible beliefs accepted as basic in that community, the epistemologists of that community could legitimately claim that these beliefs are rationally accepted in the basic way. This objection, known as the Son of the Great Pumpkin Objection, can be formally presented as follows:

1. If Reformed epistemologists can legitimately claim that belief in God is rationally acceptable in the basic way, then for any other belief accepted in some community, the epistemologists of that community could legitimately claim that it was properly basic, no matter how bizarre the belief.
2. The consequent of this conditional is false.
3. The Reformed epistemologist can't legitimately claim that belief in God is rationally acceptable in the basic way.

Plantinga responds by showing that under any interpretation of "rational" or "legitimately" this argument fails. I will first present the three possible notions of "rational" and consequently the three notions of "legitimately."

Martin's first notion of rationality can be construed as justification. If this is so, the voodooist could obviously be within their intellectual rights in thinking what they do think (if only by virtue of cognitive malfunction) Second, rationality can be taken in the internal sense. A belief is internally rational if it is produced by faculties functioning properly 'downstream from experience' if, given your experience (including doxastic experience) at the time in question, it is compatible with proper function that you accept the belief in question. That could certainly be so for the voodooist. Perhaps they have always been taught that these voodoo beliefs are true, and all allegedly contrary evidence is cleverly explained away by priests; or perhaps they are all in the grip of some cognitive malfunction upstream from experience, one that skews their doxastic experience. Third, rationality can be taken in the sense of warrant. The question is whether, if I can legitimately claim that belief in God is properly basic with respect to warrant, the epistemologists of the voodoo community can legitimately claim that these voodoo beliefs are properly basic with respect to warrant. The truth of Martin's third possible notion of rationality rests on how we interpret the use of "legitimately claim."

The first interpretation to be made of legitimately claim is to claim truthfully. By this Martin could mean that if belief in God can truthfully be said to be warrant basic, then the same goes for voodoo belief. This is entirely false. It is entirely possible that belief in God has warrant in the basic way and voodoo beliefs do not have it in the basic way. This state of affairs would obtain for example if the A/C model is true but voodoo belief originates in some kind of cognitive error. Second, our interpretation could mean to claim justifiably. Obviously those

epistemologists might be justified in thinking that voodoo belief is warrant basic. It might seem just obvious to them after protracted reflection and after considering objections that indeed voodoo belief is warrant basic. Finally we could understand Martin to mean claim warrantedly. It does not follow from the Reformed position that the voodoo epistemologist is warranted in claiming that voodoo belief is properly basic with respect to warrant. Suppose, that voodoo belief is in fact false, and suppose further that it arose originally in some kind of mistake or confusion, or out of fearful reaction to natural phenomena of one sort or another, or in the mind of some group hoping to gain or perpetuate personal political power. If so then those original voodoo beliefs do not possess warrant. Suppose that this knowledge was passed down through testimony. If the original person who passed it down did not have warrant, then all subsequent believers do not have warrant. If the testifier has no warrant then consequently the testiftee does not have warrant either, even if the latter's faculties are working perfectly. Suppose the voodoo epistemologist accepts the voodoo belief based on testimony together with other premises of their being properly basic with respect to warrant. Then his conclusion that the voodoo beliefs are warrant basic will not be itself warranted, because it is accepted on the basis of an argument at least one premise of which has no warrant for him. Suppose I believe  $p$  and  $q$  and together they form the belief  $r$ . If either  $p$  or  $q$  lack warrant, then subsequently  $r$  will lack warrant as well. This shows a case in which Christian belief can be warranted and voodoo belief is not, if namely, the Christian faith is true and the voodoo belief is false. Based on the points made above we have reason to believe that under any interpretation of both "rational" and "legitimately claim" Martin's first premise is falsified and thus his argument fails.

Fourth, it can be argued that if Christian belief is warranted then an analogous belief can enjoy the same epistemic status. Let us consider the main alternative to theism, naturalism. Naturalism is the view that no such person as God or anyone or anything like God exists. Furthermore, naturalists contend that our cognitive faculties have arisen by way of the processes pointed to in contemporary evolutionary theory, principally, random genetic mutation and natural selection. Naturalism is similar to theism in that it plays the same role of providing an explanatory model for who we are, where we come from, and where we are going. But if Plantinga's evolutionary argument against naturalism is correct, this set of beliefs held by naturalists is not such that if it is true then very likely it has warrant. Naturalism would lack warrant in virtue of the fact that if evolution is true it is not likely that our belief producing processes and mechanisms are, in fact, reliable, in which case the beliefs that they produce, including the belief that naturalism is true, do not have warrant.

One may still object however that even if one concedes that Plantinga's evolutionary argument is correct a whole series of objectionable belief systems could be granted warrant. For instance, take a religious group known as the Devil Worshipers. This group affirms that a malicious demon controls the universe. One may object that this system, and an infinite number of similar systems, could be granted warrant if an analogue to the SD is put into the belief system. Let us call this new belief system Devil Worship Plus SD (DWPSD). According to the objection DWPSD would be granted warrant simply because a notion of SD was introduced into their belief system thereby allowing them to meet the requirement warrant. Does this spell trouble for Plantinga's reformed epistemology? Not necessarily. As far as I understand Plantinga does not directly address this objection however I trust a sufficient response is available.

I believe in the case of DWPSD Plantinga would bite the philosophical bullet. If DWPSD can show that their beliefs are formed by cognitive faculties functioning properly in a cognitive

environment according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth Plantinga would happily acknowledge their beliefs as warranted. However, the burden of proof is now placed back on the objector to find an *actual* religious system which meets Plantinga's requirements. It is here where I see the objection lose its strength. It would seem if a religion such as DWPSD existed it would be all but too similar to the major monotheistic religions that already exist, namely Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. It would seem a rather arbitrary switch to replace the omni-benevolent conception of God with one of a malevolent deity. Needless to say, let's assume this belief system actually exists, is found, and is presented for philosophical investigation. I believe that if the stringent criteria put forth by the reformed epistemologist can be met, the belief system in question should be more than qualified to receive warrant.

#### **§4 Concluding Remarks**

When discussing the material of this paper with colleagues and friends I discovered people's comments generally fell into two categories. The first set of comments questioned the content of the essay, questioning logical structure, validity, and soundness. These comments proved to be quite fruitful and it is my hope that most if not all of the comments have been addressed in one form or another. It was, however, the second set of comments which I found the most engaging. The question that seemed to be reoccurring in countless conversations was simple yet poignant. "Why should I care if Christianity is warranted?" An honest question and I believe a very important one. Philosophy, even in its finest and most brilliant moments has a tendency to appear arbitrary, irrelevant, and all but applicable to our lives. So how does the work done in this paper fare? Is the epistemic status of Christianity with respect to warrant arbitrary, irrelevant, and impractical? I believe not.

Challenges to belief in God have come in two forms. First, *de facto* challenges claim that theistic beliefs are false. Second, *de jure* challenges claim that theistic beliefs are irrational, unreasonable, unjustified, or in some other way properly subject to invidious epistemic criticism. If Christianity is shown to be warranted it will be shown that there is not a sensible *de jure* criticism that is independent of the *de facto* question. If the warrant enjoyed by belief in God is related in this way to the truth of that belief, then the question whether theistic belief has warrant is not, after all, independent of the question of whether theistic belief is true. This fact invalidates an enormous amount of recent and contemporary atheology, for much of that atheology is devoted to *de jure* complaints that are allegedly independent of *de facto* questions. The atheologist who wishes to attack the *warrant* of theistic belief must challenge the *truth* of the belief as well. They can no longer adopt the stance: "Well I certainly don't know whether theistic belief is true – who could know a thing like that? – but I do know this: it is irrational, or unjustified, or not rationally justified or contrary to reason or intellectually irresponsible." So what is the big deal? If Christian belief can be shown to be warranted, the philosophical discourse used in discussing religious epistemology will be forever changed.