

ABSTRACT

Alvin Plantinga's Restatement of Augustine's Freewill Theodicy and its Implications for his Concept of "Warranted" Christian Belief

John J. Johnson, M.A., Ph.D.

Mentor: Bob E. Patterson, Ph.D.

In this dissertation, I attempt to show how Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga addresses a major stumbling block to Christian faith, the problem of evil, and how his approach could provide a foundation for his idea of "warranted" Christianity.

I wish to do the following. One, to show how Plantinga departs from Augustine on the matter of evil and free will. Two, to show how Plantinga's Christian epistemology could be strengthened. I believe that his approach, widely described as "Reformed epistemology," is a flawed epistemological edifice and could be improved upon if he would incorporate into it some of the same ideas that makes his free will defense so successful. Therefore, I will examine his free will defense, then analyze his Christian epistemology, and finally show how that epistemology could be made stronger, not by abandoning what is distinctive to it, but rather by incorporating other elements into it, some of which are found in Plantinga's own, earlier writings, and some of which are found in the "evidentialist" approach to Christian epistemology found in the writings of philosopher Richard Swinburne and sociologist of religion Rodney Stark.

Alvin Plantinga's Restatement of Augustine's Free Will Theodicy and its
Implications for his Concept of "Warranted" Christian Belief

by

John J. Johnson, B.A., M.A.

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William H. Bellinger, Jr., Ph.D., Chairperson

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Approved by the Dissertation Committee

Bob E. Patterson, Ph.D.

Barry A. Harvey, Ph.D.

Stuart E. Rosenbaum, Ph.D.

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J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
<i>Plantinga on Evil</i>	1
<i>Significance and Purpose</i>	3
<i>Plantinga’s Epistemology</i>	4
<i>Chapter Outline</i>	6
CHAPTER TWO	12
Plantinga’s Re-shaping of Augustine’s Free Will Theodicy	12
<i>Introduction</i>	12
<i>St. Augustine’s Free Will Defense</i>	13
<i>Critiques of Augustine</i>	25
<i>Plantinga’s Treatment of Augustine</i>	29
<i>Plantinga’s God, Freedom, and Evil</i>	34
<i>Conclusion</i>	47
CHAPTER THREE	48
Problems with the Free Will Defense, and Questions about Plantinga’s Oorthodoxy Arising from his Understanding of God and Evil	48
<i>Introduction</i>	48
<i>Is Plantinga’s Free Will Defense Reformed?</i>	49
<i>Questions about the Logic and Morality of Plantinga’s Free Will Defense</i>	62
<i>Conclusion</i>	83
CHAPTER FOUR.....	85
Plantinga’s Rejection of Epistemological Foundationalism.....	85

<i>Introduction</i>	85
<i>Foundationalism</i>	85
<i>Plantinga's Goals</i>	92
<i>Plantinga and Modern Bible Scholarship</i>	116
<i>Conclusion</i>	122
CHAPTER FIVE	123
Problems with Plantinga's Notion of Warranted Christian Faith	123
<i>Introduction</i>	123
<i>The Oddness of Plantinga's A/C Model, and His Reluctance to Engage in Positive Apologetics</i>	124
<i>How Can Plantinga Adjudicate Between Rival Religious Truth-Claims?</i>	128
<i>The Parity Argument</i>	137
<i>The Noetic Effects of Sin</i>	142
<i>The Holy Spirit and the Bible in Plantinga's A/C Model</i>	147
<i>Conclusion</i>	155
CHAPTER SIX.....	156
A Way Forward: How Plantinga's Epistemology could be Strengthened.....	156
<i>Introduction</i>	156
<i>The New Testament and Evidentialism</i>	159
<i>Aquinas and Evidentialism</i>	162
<i>Non-Contradiction and Rival Religious Truth-Claims</i>	165
<i>Richard Swinburne and Competing Religious Truth-Claims</i>	170
<i>What Constitutes a Warranted Christian Belief?</i>	184
<i>Conclusion</i>	188
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	190

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Plantinga on Evil

Thirty years ago Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga thought the problem of horrendous evil was the primary theoretical difficulty for belief in God for those outside of the Christian faith. His response was to write *God, Freedom, and Evil*,¹ a book that many believe successfully answered the charge that belief in the Christian God was rendered logically impossible by the reality of suffering.² His restatement of the free will argument in this book made naturalistic “verificationism” temporarily retreat into a modest obscurity. However, as the years passed, the debate shifted for Plantinga and his critics. Gradually, Plantinga was forced to answer those who claimed that, even if he had provided a strong answer to the perennial problem of evil, other Christian beliefs remained improbable.

Therefore, in 2000 Plantinga wrote his magnum opus, *Warranted Christian Belief*.³ This work is the culmination of his years working in the field of epistemology, and the book argues for a specifically Christian type of religious epistemology. However, as many critics have pointed out, Plantinga’s work is highly problematic. My goal in

¹ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

² A classic example of the type of critique Plantinga was responding to is John Mackie’s “Evil and Omnipotence,” *Mind* 64 (1955): 200-212.

³ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). See footnote 11 for the three books he wrote after 1974 to lay the foundation for his concept of “warranted beliefs.”

this dissertation is to show that there is a way for Plantinga's Christian epistemology to be strengthened in two ways. First, his approach to Christian faith, which is now widely described as "Reformed epistemology," needs to be more open to the so-called evidentialist approach to faith, an approach best exemplified by Plantinga's leading contemporary in Christian philosophy of religion, Richard Swinburne. Second, Plantinga's flawed epistemological edifice could be improved upon if he would incorporate into it some of the same ideas that made his free will defense so successful. Therefore, I will examine his free will defense, then analyze his Christian epistemology, and finally show how that epistemology could be made stronger, not by abandoning what is distinctive to it, but rather by incorporating other elements into it, some of which are found in Plantinga's own, earlier writings, and some of which are found in Swinburne's works.

Plantinga sees his 1974 work as a departure from past theodicies, especially his understanding of St. Augustine's work on the topic. Plantinga claims he is not attempting to "prove" that evil is a part of God's grand design, as he thinks it is in the thought of St. Augustine. Plantinga claims his goal is far more modest; he wishes to show that evil does not entail a logical contradiction for the orthodox Christian.⁴ Evil may prove greatly troublesome to the Christian mind, but it does not necessarily invalidate the believer's faith, Plantinga claims.

⁴ By orthodox, I mean the definition given by Plantinga, where he states that the brand of Christian faith he writes of is that which "is common to the great creeds of the main branches of the Christian church, what unites Calvin and Aquinas, Luther and Augustine, Menno Simons and Karl Barth, Mother Teresa and St. Maximus the Confessor, Billy Graham and St. Gregory Palamas—classical Christian belief, as we might call it." Taken from the Preface of his *Warranted Christian Belief* (no page number).

Plantinga is trying to create a free will defense, not a free will theodicy.⁵ He is not claiming to know *why* God permits evil. His goal is only to avoid contradicting what he sees as the heart of his free will defense, namely, the assertion that “God is omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good.”⁶ I will not be assessing Plantinga’s interpretation of Augustine to determine whether or not he has correctly understood the Bishop of Hippo. Rather, I will explain Plantinga’s interpretation of Augustine, and his interpretation of the relationship between evil and free will that has come down to us in what could be called the “Augustinian tradition.” The important point for this dissertation is how Plantinga has changed the ideas that he thinks are at the heart of the Augustinian tradition regarding God, evil, and human freedom.

Significance and Purpose

This dissertation will be significant for two reasons. First, because I can find no dissertation or book that specifically examines how Plantinga has modified what he, rightly or wrongly, understands as Augustine’s theodicy. Second, I am unaware of any published work that takes elements of Plantinga’s modified Augustinian theodicy and shows how they could be used to improve Plantinga’s Christian epistemology. Since one Reformed theologian could say in 1993 that Plantinga’s treatment of evil “is virtually

⁵ Alvin Plantinga, “The Free Will Defense,” in *The Analytic Theist* ed. James F. Sennett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 22-49. As explained above, Plantinga cites as an example of Free Will Theodicy the work of St. Augustine, who “tries to tell us what God’s reason is for permitting evil. At bottom, he says, it’s that God can create a more perfect universe by permitting evil” (25). Such certitude, of course, goes beyond anything Plantinga is attempting to do.

⁶ Plantinga, *The Analytic Theist*, 22.

acknowledged as successful by theist and nontheist alike,”⁷ it is essential that Plantinga’s ideas on the matter be investigated, especially if they could be applied to *Warranted Christian Belief*, a book widely viewed as one of the major works of philosophical theology in several decades.

Plantinga’s Epistemology

Plantinga is the leader of what is labeled Reformed epistemology.⁸ The foundation for his religious epistemology is what he calls “properly basic” belief. Here, Plantinga is rebelling against the Enlightenment notion that religious beliefs require some sort of objective “evidence” on their behalf (this concept is often termed evidentialism). For Plantinga, Christianity does not need to be established via sensory data: “the evidential objection to theistic belief is rooted in [failed] classical foundationalism.”⁹ Plantinga’s idea of properly basic belief results from his position that Christian beliefs are “not arrived at as a result of inference or argument, but in the [same] immediate way that beliefs arrived at through perception or memory occur.”¹⁰ Such beliefs are produced by God and constitute “a properly functioning epistemic faculty that is aimed at truth.”¹¹

⁷ Kelly James Clark, ed., *Philosophers Who Believe: The Spiritual Journeys of 11 Leading Thinkers*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 13.

⁸ See William J. Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006), 6-8.

⁹ Plantinga, *The Analytic Theist*, 161.

¹⁰ Deane-Peter Baker, “Plantinga’s Reformed Epistemology: What’s the Question?” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (2005), 78.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

Closely related to his notion of properly basic belief is his concept of “warrant.” For Plantinga, an idea has warrant if it contains true knowledge, not just true belief. He cites the example of an avid sports fan who “knows” in his heart his team will win the game. If his team does indeed win, the fan evinced true belief, but this cannot be said to be true knowledge. But warrant moves beyond this kind of true belief and is more substantial: “a belief has warrant just if it is produced by cognitive possessor faculties that are functioning properly.”¹² Plantinga would say that Christian belief, produced in a community of believers, and nurtured by the Holy Spirit, displays such “properly functioning” faculties.¹³ Plantinga further elaborates that the Christian “believes that those who disagree with him lack some epistemic benefit or grace he has; hence he isn’t being merely arbitrary. He thinks those opposing opinions are less well founded, epistemologically, than his own.”¹⁴

Essential to Plantinga’s epistemology is the idea of the *spiritus divinitatis*, for which he draws heavily on the thinking of Aquinas, Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards.¹⁵ According to Plantinga, his epistemology does not require proof in the traditional

¹² Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, xi.

¹³ Plantinga’s thinking on this point is amplified by K. Scott Oliphint: warranted belief “is something that is instituted by God because, without such initiation on God’s part, we could not have belief suitable for warrant; the best we could have would be probable belief.” “Epistemology and Christian Belief,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, 63 (2001), 159.

¹⁴ Alvin Plantinga, “Ad Hick,” *Faith and Philosophy* 14 (1997), 298.

¹⁵ See chapters 8 and 9 of *Warranted Christian Belief* for his fullest treatment of the matter. I will not address in this dissertation the question of whether or not Plantinga is correct in his assessment of these thinkers. I will only show how his interpretation of them informs his own thinking.

apologetic manner, because Christian faith itself is largely a matter of the inner workings of the Spirit. Plantinga's position is not based on an "objective," Enlightenment-style approach: "belief in the main lines of the gospel is produced in Christians by a special work of the Holy Spirit, not by belief-producing faculties and processes with which we were originally created."¹⁶ Plantinga elaborates, stating that the work of the Spirit in establishing the bedrock for Christian epistemology is absolutely essential. The fundamentals of Christian faith come "by way of the work of the Holy Spirit, who gets us to accept, causes us to believe, these great truths of the gospel. These beliefs don't just come by way of the normal operation of our natural faculties; they are a supernatural gift."¹⁷

Chapter Outline

Chapter one will be entitled "Plantinga's Re-shaping of Augustine's Free Will Theodicy." It will be an examination of Augustine's understanding of the mystery of evil, and the problems that inevitably arise from his attempt to create a theodicy that is morally and intellectually satisfying to the Christian mind. Ultimately, despite his best efforts, it seems as if God is responsible either directly, or indirectly, for the fall of the angelic host, and the subsequent rebellion of Adam and Eve in the Garden. In order to appreciate what

¹⁶ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 285. Thus Plantinga is solidly behind other reformed thinkers like John Frame, who argue that the truths of the gospel will never appeal to man in his "natural, objective" state. See, for example, Frame's *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1994).

¹⁷ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 245. Commenting on Plantinga's thinking here, Oliphint notes that "without such initiation on God's part, we could not have belief suitable for warrant; the best we could have would be probable belief" ("Epistemology and Christian Belief," 159).

Plantinga rejects in his reading of Augustine, the reader must have a firm understanding of how the Bishop of Hippo approached this issue. The chapter will then examine how Plantinga has turned Augustine's free will theodicy into a more modest, more defensible, free will defense. Plantinga sees his 1974 work as a departure from past theodicies, especially that of Augustine. Plantinga claims he is not attempting to "prove" that evil is a part of God's grand design, as in his reading of St. Augustine. God, in Augustine's view, permits evil in order to bring about a more perfect universe. This requires humans to be endowed with free will, and sometimes they abuse this gift. But Augustine explains all of this, thinks Plantinga, by claiming that the world is a better place than it would have been had God not granted his creatures this freedom. Plantinga thinks his goal is far more modest than Augustine's; he only wishes to show that the reality of suffering and evil does not entail a logical contradiction for the orthodox Christian believer. Evil may prove greatly troublesome to the Christian mind, but it does not necessarily invalidate the believer's faith, Plantinga claims. Plantinga is not claiming to know *why* God permits evil. His goal is only to avoid contradicting what he sees as the heart of his free will defense, namely, the assertion that God is all-loving and all-powerful. Plantinga wants to remove even the suspicion that God might be the author of evil, a position he suspects is inherent in the Augustinian tradition. The implications of his remolding of Augustine will have ramifications for Plantinga's work on epistemology, as explained below.

Chapter two is entitled "Problems with the Free Will Defense, and Questions about Plantinga's Orthodoxy Arising from his Understanding of God and Evil." While many thinkers, Christian and non-Christian, admit that Plantinga has solved (albeit it in a decidedly non-Reformed manner) the logical contradictions inherent in the traditional

Christian response to the problem of evil, there are still many objections that have been raised against it. In this chapter, I will examine some of those objections. First I will consider the arguments of several critics who claim that, while his free will defense may indeed solve the problem of evil from a purely logical point of view, it does so at the cost of sacrificing Reformed orthodoxy, something that Plantinga claims to champion. This will be important in my final chapter, where I offer a solution to Plantinga's flawed epistemology that may strike many as somewhat "non-Reformed." Second, I will look at objections that have been raised against his free will defense, and how he has answered some of those objections.

Chapter three, "Plantinga's Rejection of Epistemological Foundationalism," will be an in-depth look at what Plantinga calls his "Aquinas/Calvin Model" (A/C Model). This is his term for his epistemological system that he believes avoids the trap of traditional apologetic "proofs" found in the evidentialist approach to Christian apologetics. Plantinga, in Reformed fashion, does not think the traditional arguments for the truth of Christianity are up to the task. But not only that, he believes they are *unnecessary*. Plantinga has developed a model of Christian faith that relies upon what he terms the "internal instigation of the Holy Spirit." (*sensus divinitatis*). The Holy Spirit, Plantinga claims, provides the Christian with a confidence that Christianity is true. That is, the Christian's faith is secure, or what Plantinga calls "properly basic," because it does not rest on any other types of proof or evidence. Plantinga rejects the classical foundationalism of thinkers like Locke (and apologists like William Paley, for example), who insist that faith must be grounded upon some type of empirical evidence.

Plantinga disagrees, and argues that Christian beliefs are simply an epistemological given, and do not require any sort of foundationalist/evidentialist support.

Closely related to proper basicity is his concept of “warrant.” For Plantinga, an idea has warrant if it contains true knowledge, not just true belief. He cites the example of an avid sports fan who “knows” in his heart his team will win the game. If his team does indeed win, the fan evinced true belief, but this cannot be said to be true knowledge. But warrant moves beyond this kind of true belief and is more substantial; a belief has warrant if it is the product of properly functioning cognitive faculties. Plantinga would say that Christian belief, produced in a community of believers, and nurtured by the Holy Spirit, displays such “properly functioning” faculties. Thus, Christian faith is a result of grace, not logic, proofs or argumentation.

Chapter four, “Problems with Plantinga’s Notion of Warranted Christian Faith,” will be a critical examination of Plantinga's notion of warranted Christian faith as derived from the A/C Model. The major problem that I wish to point out is that Plantinga's epistemological system does not allow for any adjudication of the world's various religious truth-claims. That is, if Christians can claim that their beliefs are properly basic because the Holy Spirit has imparted them, why cannot Jews and Muslims claim the same thing? Amazingly enough, Plantinga admits, briefly, that this is a problem for his epistemology, but makes no effort to offer any kind of remedy. Even when he claims that clearly bizarre beliefs, like voodoo or Nazism, are not epistemologically warranted, he really offers no compelling reason why Christianity is certainly true, and something like voodoo obviously false. Additionally, when Plantinga claims John Calvin and Thomas Aquinas as the inspiration for his A/C model, this is problematic. For although these

thinkers were not evidentialists in the same way as, say, Paley or many 20th-century evangelical apologists, they were not as opposed to rational argumentation as Plantinga seems to think. Thus, his choice to name his A/C model after them seems odd at best, misleading at worst. As with Augustine, I will not be trying to assess how accurately Plantinga interprets either Calvin or Augustine. My purpose will be only to show how his interpretation of these thinkers helped him establish his particular epistemology.

Chapter five, "A way forward: How Plantinga's Christian epistemology could be strengthened," is an attempt, not to abandon Plantinga's notion of warranted Christian faith derived from the A/C Model, but rather to find ways to strengthen it. I will argue that Plantinga is fully within his epistemic rights to insist that Christian faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, this has always been the orthodox position of the various Christian churches. But, to insist that faith is based *solely* on the instigation of the Holy Spirit is not the position of historic Christianity. In fact, Plantinga has given us a system that in effect is fideistic, for two reasons. First, it does not allow one to compare the contradicting truth-claims of various world religions. Plantinga sees no need to engage in such arbitration, rejecting it as a remnant of failed Enlightenment/foundationalist thinking. Second, he has created an epistemology that is basically unfalsifiable, because any evidence that is outside of the Christian's personal, epistemological experience is not allowed to count. And, in science, so in theology; what cannot be falsified cannot be proven, either, and is in danger of slipping into the realm of utter subjectivity because it is not subject to any sort of rational verification.

My suggestion for a way forward for Plantinga is twofold. First, I will show that Plantinga simply cannot avoid incorporating at least some evidentialist thinking into his

approach. Not to do so is to offer a very poor Christian apologetic indeed and, as Plantinga admits, his work is intended to be seen in an apologetic context. To this end, the writings of his fellow Christian epistemologist Richard Swinburne will be examined, to show how Swinburne's approach (which appeals to evidence, not proof, for faith) could be incorporated into Plantinga's A/C model, without sacrificing any of Plantinga's stress upon the faith-producing work of the Holy Spirit. Second, I will show how the key idea (i.e., non-contradiction) that Plantinga used to show that evil is not incompatible with Christian faith can be brought to bear on his epistemology. This will not be a perfect solution to the dilemma of Plantinga's A/C model, but by using elements gleaned from his free will defense, I hope to show how he could at least start on the path toward a Christian epistemology that is neither fideistic, nor which can be co-opted by other, non-Christian theists (it is my contention that both situations obtain with the A/C model in its present state). In other words, I hope to outline a version of the A/C model that would be specifically Christian in its epistemology, one that would be compatible with Plantinga's aim of presenting and defending, in Jonathan Edwards' famous words, "the great things of the gospel."

CHAPTER TWO

Plantinga's Re-shaping of Augustine's Free Will Theodicy

Introduction

When theologians and philosophers of religion speak of the free will defense related to the problem of evil, they are, in effect, speaking of the attempts of St. Augustine to find an intellectually satisfying solution to the so-called problem of evil, the knottiest problem for the theist in any religious tradition, but especially the Christian one. David Hume, one of the stronger opponents of the traditional theistic arguments for God's existence, summed up the dilemma well when he wrote of the biblical God, "[I]s he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"¹ Augustine understood the predicament that Hume describes. In fact, "Augustine wrestled his whole life with the problems of evil, what would later be called theodicy."² The Bishop of Hippo's influence in this area has dominated Western thought since the 5th century, although his thinking on evil, and most other things, was never as dominant in the Orthodox East.³ Still, "His interpretation of the nature and origin of moral evil has been

¹ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Nelson Pike (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co, Inc., 1970), 88. The Greek philosopher Epicurus seems to be the one who first noted this problem for theistic belief.

² Frederick H. Russell, "Only Something Good can be Evil: The Genesis of Augustine's Secular Ambivalence," *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 698.

³ John Hick points out that the two major strands of theodicy that emerge from the patristic period are Augustine's free will theodicy, and the theodicy that has its origins in Irenaeus (120-202 AD). Hick explains that although Irenaeus did not technically develop

the standard Christian interpretation for many centuries. There are, of course, variations on his ideas, but the commonly accepted Christian position is based upon Augustine.”⁴

The purpose of this chapter will be to examine the manner in which Augustine reconciled evil with Christian faith; to point out weaknesses in his theodicy; and to explain how Alvin Plantinga has transformed what he understands (rightly or wrongly) to be Augustine’s theodicy into what Plantinga terms his “free will defense.”

St. Augustine’s Free Will Defense

After his conversion from paganism, one of the most difficult tasks facing Augustine was, how does the Christian reconcile belief in an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God with the reality of suffering that suffuses God’s creation? In his days as a Manichee, explaining evil was not so difficult for him. The Manichaean universe was a dualistic one. That is, there were two equally strong, but opposite powers (good and evil), that held sway in the world. Thus Augustine learned that we “sin not because we ourselves, exercising control, determine which action of those open to us will be realized. Rather we sin because we are compelled by the dark power of evil operating upon us

the theodicy that stands in contrast to Augustine’s, he can still be thought of as its “patron saint.” In Irenaeus’ view, the fall of humankind is not the cosmic disaster it is in Augustine, but rather a “youthful error” on the part of Adam and Eve. According to Hick, the Irenaean view is much more compatible with modern evolutionary thought, for it sees man “as an immature creature living in a challenging and therefore person-making world.” Taken from John Hick, “An Irenaean Theodicy,” in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001), 39. For Hick’s fullest treatment of the subject, see his classic *Evil and the God of Love* (Harper and Row: 1966).

⁴ Guy F. Ranson, “Augustine’s Account of the Nature and Origin of Moral Evil,” *Review and Expositor* 50 (1953): 309.

from within.”⁵ Named after their founder, the Persian prophet Mani (AD 215-276), the Manichaean religion was a melting pot of Zoroastrianism, mystery religions, and Greek philosophical ideas. The universal battle between good and evil, in the Manichaean view, “eventually spilled over into a created world which became the stage for the struggle of cosmic forces. Man’s part in this battle was to overcome the tugs and desires created by elements of darkness and to pursue the life of light.”⁶ The Manichees had one great advantage when it came to their attempts at theodicy. They were able to say that evil did not come from God. In fact, God could not be said in any way to be the origin of anything evil in the universe. Rather, evil is a result of the “contrary nature” that fights the good plan of God, “existing independently, warring on the good, and compelling the innately good souls of human beings into sin.”⁷

Once Augustine became a Christian, such an easy dismissal of the reality of evil and suffering was no longer an option for him. He no longer believed that there were two equally powerful but hostile forces in the universe, but rather one supreme God who ruled everything. Still, his understanding of evil had to take into account the Manichaean understanding, which he had rejected upon his conversion: “In dealing with the problem of evil it is well to remember that Augustine was most often refuting the theory he had learned from the Manichaeans which held that evil is a substance. . . . This was

⁵ William S. Babcock, “Augustine on Sin and Moral Agency,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 16 (1988): 30.

⁶ Donald Brochert, “Beyond Augustine’s Answer to Evil,” *Canadian Journal of Theology* 8 (1961): 238.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

metaphysical dualism, and against this Augustine revolted because he could not conceive an eternal substance, kingdom, and will in opposition to God.”⁸

But it was not only his attempt to refute the Manichaean view of evil that prompted Augustine to clarify his position on evil. The scriptures, both Jewish and Christian, presented the one God as fully in control of his universe. The reality of Satan is taught in the New Testament, but he is never said to be equal to God. He is, in Luther’s playful yet theologically lucid phrase, “God’s devil.” So, Augustine was faced with the baffling question that has haunted monotheists, especially Christians: why does an all-loving, all-good God allow evil in his universe? Perhaps he cannot prevent evil? Then he is not all-powerful. Maybe he does not want to prevent it? Then he is not all-good.

It is important to recognize that Augustine was no armchair theologian, pontificating upon the problem of evil as if it were a purely academic matter. Within a short space of time evil hit home for Augustine as he experienced the loss of his mother, his son, and a good friend.⁹ The question of evil had long plagued him. In fact, it was

⁸ Ranson, “Augustine’s Account of the Nature and Origin of Moral Evil,” 313.

⁹ Johannes Brachtendorf, “The Goodness of Creation and the Reality of Evil: Suffering as a Problem in Augustine’s Theodicy,” *Augustinian Studies* 31 (2000): 80-81. To highlight Augustine’s sensitivity to suffering, Brachtendorf writes: “[h]is references to the fate of the Christians during the sack of Rome (cf. *civ. Dei* 1.9-19) as well as the long list of human miseries in *civ. Dei* 19 show clearly that he was well aware of the reality of suffering. Especially moving is a passage in *civ. Dei* 22.22, in which Augustine complains of the torments that even small baptized children, the most innocent of beings, have to suffer” (p. 81). Even if Augustine did not possess a keen awareness of the awful reality of suffering, his work, and that of other theodicyists, would not be imperiled, for “metaphysical theories typically are not required to provide relief or consolation. The provision of relief or consolation to those experiencing pain or suffering is utterly incidental to the purposes of a metaphysical doctrine.” From Donald A. Cress, “Augustine’s Privation Account of Evil,” *Augustinian Studies* 20 (1989): 114.

one of the reasons he was drawn to the Manichees in the first place.¹⁰ But as a Christian theologian, he had to reject the metaphysical dualism of that system, and he came to believe that God allows evil, although He is in no way responsible for it.¹¹ Here we see developing the core of the freewill defense as it has been used ever since. When examining the Fall of man, Augustine concluded that “God could have made it impossible for man to do evil, but He chose to give him freedom of will and put within his power the possibility of evil in order to proclaim what man’s pride could bring upon him and what God’s grace could accomplish.”¹²

Early in his Christian career, writing against the Manichees to refute their explanation of evil,¹³ Augustine seems to have taken the position that a world that contained evil should not alarm the believer, for evil does not frustrate God’s providence. In fact, God knew his creatures would sin. Still, “[s]uch is the generosity of God’s goodness that he has not refrained from creating even the creature which he foreknew would not only sin, but remain in the will to sin. As a runaway horse is better than a stone which does not run away because it lacks self-movement and sense perception, so the creature is more excellent which sins by free will than which does not sin only

¹⁰ Ibid., 81-82.

¹¹ There are some passages, especially in the Old Testament, that seem to indicate that God does indeed cause evil. For instance, Isaiah 45:7 says of God, “I form the light and darkness / I bring prosperity and create disaster / I, the LORD, do all these things.”

¹² Ranson, “Augustine’s Account of the Nature and Origin of Moral Evil,” 315.

¹³ His work, *De libero arbitrio* (Free Choice), was probably begun in Rome in 388, and eventually completed some 8 years later in Hippo. See William A. Jurgens, “St. Augustine of Hippo,” in Vol. 3 of *The Faith of the Early Fathers* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1979), 38-39.

because it has no free will.”¹⁴ At this point, Augustine is interested in refuting the notion that God could in any way be responsible for evil. Elsewhere in *Free Choice* he writes,

Every good is from God. There is no nature, therefore, which is not from God. That movement, however, of turning away from God is what we acknowledged was sin, because it is a defective movement and every defect is from nothing. See whence it comes, and you may be certain that it does not come from God. Nevertheless, because it is voluntary, this very defect lies within our power.”¹⁵

So evil is something that man, not God, has brought into the universe. But the next question Augustine had to address was, why did humans do this? Why did the creation of an all-good, all-wise God “go bad” at all? If God is perfect, should we not assume that His creation should be perfect as well? Why endow man with freedom if the result was the catastrophic conditions of sin and death brought on by the Fall? Before moving to the heart of his thought in this matter, some attention must be paid to Augustine’s idea of evil as privation. That is, evil is not a thing in itself (certainly not something “made” by God!) but rather a lack, an absence of the good. “Because all creatures are created out of nothing they are mutable, and because of this capacity for change there is the possibility that nature may fall away and tend toward nonexistence. Because man is also created out of nothing, he has the same tendency to fall away toward nonexistence, and thus evil arises in him.”¹⁶

¹⁴ St. Augustine, “The Problem of Free Choice,” Vol. 22 of *Ancient Christian Writers* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1955), 14-15.

¹⁵ Quoted in Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*. 3, 39.

¹⁶ Ranson, “Augustine’s Account of the Nature and Origin of Moral Evil,” 315. The so-called privation theory has been criticized on various fronts, not the least because of its seeming inability to take evil seriously enough. “There are critics who claim that the privation theory of evil is tantamount to or at least reducible to the thesis that evil is illusory and unreal. Some critics have gone so far as to associate the privation theory of evil with the views of Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian science, who taught in her *Science and Health with Key to Scriptures* that evil is illusory and utterly unreal.

Whatever the merits of Augustine's privation theory of evil, it must be borne in mind that he did not consider it a plenary solution to the problem of evil; he and others like him (notably Aquinas) "offered the privation theory as the full answer only to the question of the nature of evil [not its origin]. Augustine's assertion, then, must be understood as indicating that the privation theory is *necessary* for solving the problem of evil. While he—and other classical theodicians—did not regard it as providing an answer to the question of the cause and origin of evil, they considered it essential to avoid error on this question."¹⁷ Augustine had an explanation of sorts, but again, he seems not to have been fully convinced by it, as shown by the effort he expended on explaining why, on a moral level, sin first entered the world.

Problematic for Augustine is the fact that man, and indeed, the angels, were created good by God. This had to be the case, he contends, for, if God's creatures were sinful at the point of their creation, the fault would be God's, not theirs.¹⁸ Since angelic creation apparently preceded that of humans, Augustine begins there. But the dilemma

Thus it is sometimes argued that privation theory is a cruel hoax that mocks and trivializes the wretchedness of those who endure pain and suffering caused by genuinely horrible evils." Quoted from Cress, "Augustine's Privation Account of Evil," 112. More critiques of the privation theory, as well as the rest of Augustine's theodicy, will be presented at the end of this chapter.

¹⁷ G. Stanley Kane, "Evil and Privation," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11 (1980): 53. Kane's piece is a constructive attempt at explaining the misconceptions scholars often have regarding the privation theory, and what it was intended (or not intended) to accomplish. Chief among Augustine's goals were 1), to absolve God of the charge that he had created evil, and 2), to refute the notion that evil has some sort of intrinsic, "real" existence. To judge how well a modern theologian has incorporated the privation theory into his work, see Anglican scholar Austin Farrer, *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited* (London: Collins, 1962). Also of interest is Simon Oliver's "The Theodicy of Austin Farrer," *Heythrop Journal* 39 (1998): 280-97.

¹⁸ Robert K. Brown, "The First Evil Will Must be Incomprehensible: A Critique of Augustine," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 46 (2006), 320.

he faced is this: “it is seemingly impossible to conceive how a being possessed of complete wisdom and blessedness could ever choose to turn away and lose it. It is not plausible to hold that angels could be ignorant of the consequences of choosing to rebel against God. Therefore Augustine feels constrained to devise an explanation for why the evil angels willed as they did.”¹⁹

For Augustine, for whom demons were a literal reality and important players in religious history, the leader of the demons (or fallen angels) was Satan. But again, what caused this being, presumably created perfect, to reject God and become the progenitor of evil? Augustine attributes this character flaw in Satan to pride. Pride led this once perfect being of God to turn away from the Creator, and become self-focused, rather than God-focused. Satan’s example was followed by a host of other angels, who followed him down the pathway of demonic rebellion, thus creating the satanic horde that stands behind so much of the suffering we see in our world.²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid., 320. Augustine is not the first of the Church Fathers to speculate about why some angels rebelled against the Lord. Gregory of Nyssa, writing prior to Augustine, had already made the case that “God is not the cause of evil; rather, the misuse of a mutable freedom by angels and humans to turn from God, good, and being toward evil and non-being is the cause of evil.” Quoted from Rowan Greer, “Augustine’s Transformation of the Freewill Defense,” *Faith and Philosophy* 13 (1996): 475. Greer notes that Gregory’s theodicy would eventually take him in a “direction quite the opposite of the one Augustine will take ... Unlike Augustine he fails to worry about why creatures who presumably know the good should fail to act upon that knowledge.” Rather, and the influence of Irenaeus is evident here, Gregory thought that our spiritual “immaturity leads us to chose a specious good instead of the true good” (475).

²⁰ Ranson, “Augustine’s Account of the Nature and Origin of Moral Evil,” 316. Augustine here is echoing the position of St. Paul, who also views demonic elements responsible for much of the suffering on earth. For a summary of Paul’s position see Gerald R. McDermott, *God’s Rivals: Insights from the Bible and the Early Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 67-83.

At this point, Augustine anticipates a question that many who are following his argument will surely ask: why did some angels rebel, while others did not? What made some of them rebel, when they were all endowed with the same status by God? Augustine answered that they were not all created equal, but rather some were imbued with a greater amount of grace than others. They also possessed a greater degree of wisdom, which enabled them to resist the temptation to bring moral ruin upon themselves through open rebellion against their Master.²¹ For Augustine, evil's origin is found in the will of God's creatures, not in God, nor in an imperfect creation as was the case, for instance, with the Gnostic sects of the second and third centuries AD.²²

The story of human rebellion is much the same as that of angelic uprising. Just as the angels were created for a perfect existence in heaven, so Adam and Eve were destined to experience a similar state of moral perfection in the Garden. But they, too, rejected the perfection of God in order to follow the imperfect desires of their own prideful wills. The why of all this still remains an open question. Augustine, no longer able to cling comfortably to the dualism that supported his understanding of evil in his pre-Christian period, must explain why a will created seemingly good would become corrupt in the first place. Though Augustine considered various explanations, ultimately he thought he had no choice but to admit that there is no logical explanation as to why the angels, or Adam and Eve, misused their freewill. "At his best, Augustine suggests that a very first instance of willing evil, such as occurs at the fall (in which a being freely alters its

²¹ Ranson, "Augustine's Account of the Nature and Origin of Moral Evil," 316.

²² For an overview, see Arland Hultgreen and Steven Haggmark, eds, *The Earliest Christian Heretics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

fundamental condition) must be unexplainable. Therefore a theologian should not seek a cause for the fall of Adam (or Satan before him).”²³

According to Robert Brown, Augustine should have left well enough alone at this point; ignorance of some of the deep matters of God is no cause for shame. But, Augustine was always tempted to tinker with “explanations” as to why angelic and human rebellion began.²⁴ It is necessary to review some of the reasons Augustine advanced as possible explanations for the entry of sin into the universe, for it is precisely these types of theological flourishes that Plantinga claims he seeks to avoid in his much more “modest” attempt at theodicy. Augustine, not content to leave Adam’s rebellion as an impenetrable mystery, says that Adam “was in ‘an intermediate state’ between wisdom and folly. To explain what he meant by such an intermediate state Augustine cites the example of infants, who are as yet neither foolish nor wise. In fact, he notes that the terms ‘foolish’ and ‘wise’ imply something worthy of blame or praise.”²⁵ In the following passage from *The City of God*, in which his thinking on freewill and evil had reached its maturity, he says that “[i]f a man was created such that, although he was not yet wise, he could at least receive a commandment which he ought to obey, it is not surprising that he could be seduced. Nor is it unjust that he pays the penalty for not obeying the commandment.”²⁶ Augustine further states that “[i]n the garden of Eden the

²³ Brown, “The First Evil Will Must be Incomprehensible,” 316.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 316-17.

²⁵ Fred J. Berthold, Jr., “Free Will and Theodicy in Augustine,” *Journal of Religious Studies* 17 (1981): 533-34.

²⁶ St. Augustine, *City of God*, III 72, quoted in Berthold, “Free Will and Theodicy in Augustine,” 534.

commandment came to man's attention from above. From beneath came the suggestion of the serpent. Neither the commandment of God nor the suggestion of the serpent was in man's power [to fulfill]. But if he has reached the healthy state of wisdom, he is freed from all the shackles of moral difficulty, and has freedom to yield to the enticing suggestions of inferior things."²⁷

If the first couple was indeed free to succumb to the "enticing suggestions" of Satan in serpent-form, then it is hard to understand why, given the way in which Augustine portrays life in the Garden. Augustine says that in the Garden, Adam's soul was "completely at peace. . . . God was loved with a 'charity from a pure heart and a good conscience and faith unfeigned [I Timothy 1:5]. Family affection was ensured by purity of love; body and mind worked in perfect accord; and there was an effortless observation of the law of God."²⁸

Another accretion Augustine added to his initially "simple" free will defense is the idea of divine punishment. One gets the feeling that angelic and human sin makes sense for Augustine, because it allows God a chance to punish both for their transgressions! Augustine tends to see sin as part of the larger whole, rather than something that marred God's creation. Sin may regrettable, but in Augustine's thought sin is "integrated into the order of the universe by divine governance. The action which springs from a sinful will is used by God to punish its author or another sinner, or to

²⁷ Ibid., 74, quoted from Berthold, "Free Will and Theodicy in Augustine," 534.

²⁸ *City of God*, XIV 26, quoted from Berthold, 533.

perfect the goodness and virtue of some other creature.”²⁹ Augustine goes on to cite examples of how sin is used by God to maintain order and justice in the world. He cites the example of a disobedient servant who is forced to clean out the latrine by his master. Because he is rebellious, he deserves the punishment of the unpleasant job. On a more cosmic scale, Augustine envisions even the revolt of Satan as serving a valuable role in God’s governance of things: “[t]he devil’s envious and thereby sinful will finds an appropriate object in the domination of the sinners who subject themselves to his rule. . . . The universe does not require the corruption of spiritual creatures to attain its perfection but its order and beauty encompass their being and action.”³⁰ Augustine would never say that God “needed” sin in order to help him run his universe, but at times it does seem as if Augustine is implying that this is a valid way to explain why sin entered the world in the first place. Yet in some places sin is portrayed by Augustine as something that seems to be a requirement if the world is to function properly. “Augustine offers several concrete examples of his aesthetic theodicy of harmony. Besides ordinary citizens, a cruel hangman is needed for the penalty of evildoers in a well-regulated state. If prostitutes are removed from human affairs, matrons will be in danger of dishonor.”³¹

²⁹J. Patout Burns, “Augustine on the Origin and Progress of Evil,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 16 (1988): 13.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

³¹ Hohyun Sohn, “The Beauty of Hell? Augustine’s Aesthetic and its Critics,” *Theology Today* 64 (2007): 49. Although these examples are taken from one of Augustine’s early works, *On Order*, even in his later, fully mature work, *The City of God*, he still “quite consistently adhered to the aesthetic theodicy of harmony” according to Burns (50).

Considering the following example, which may strike most readers as thoughtless at best, and perhaps cruel at worst. He examines the suffering of innocent infants, and is admittedly a bit baffled at how such a thing makes sense from the position he is advancing. But, ultimately, he decides that “their suffering is pedagogical for the sake of their parents, but also adds that God will surely have some special reward stored up for them to balance their pain.”³²

But it is not only that Augustine sees sin as playing a role in God’s ordering of human affairs. Evil is actually incorporated in the universal picture by Augustine, so that rather than revising God’s transcendental attribute of omnipotence or omniscience as we find in certain modern theodicies, Augustine instead “focuses on the demonstration that God has made a right decision to create the world in his omniscient knowledge of how things will eventually turn out. . . . Augustine offers us a sense of ‘history as something unfinished,’ which still waits for its eschatological fulfillment.”³³ Once that fulfillment arrives, Augustine thinks that evil will still be an important component in the afterlife, even though the baleful effects of sin are no longer present among God’s elect: “the saints will not forget but prevent ‘the eternal misery of the damned from disappearing from memory,’ to thank God for their own destiny of grace. . . . The unworthy will be properly ordered to the ‘eternal fire,’ which is without doubt a subject for praise. Hell has its own beauty in the totality of the universe, for its fire is used by God for the punishment of the wicked after their condemnation (*Civ.* 12:4; 13:23;

³² Brochert, “Beyond Augustine’s Answer to Evil,” 240.

³³ Sohn, “The Beauty of Hell?” 52.

22:30).”³⁴ Augustine may never have succeeded in telling us precisely why Satan, and then Adam, rebelled as they did, but Augustine seems to imply at times that the reason may not be as important as one would think, since God is able to use even demonic and human sin to his ends when governing both the temporal and the eternal sphere.

Critiques of Augustine

Ted Peters has written that “Augustine bashing has become a new intellectual sport.”³⁵ Paul Ricoeur goes so far as to write of the “harm that has been done to souls, during the centuries of Christianity, first by the literal interpretation of the story of Adam, and then by the confusing of this myth, treated as history, with later speculations, principally Augustinian, about original sin, will never be adequately told.”³⁶ The feminist New Testament Elaine Pagels takes Augustine to task for what she sees as the inherent sexism and negative attitude toward sex in his presentation of original sin.³⁷ It may be inevitable that a figure that looms so large over the history of Western intellectual development should be challenged in our post-modern age.

Aside from criticisms such as those of Ricoeur and Pagels, even those more sympathetic to orthodox Christianity are troubled by much of what Augustine has to say about evil. To begin with, his privation theory has always been the subject of

³⁴ Ibid., 51.

³⁵ Ted Peters, *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 148.

³⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 239.

³⁷ As explained in Peters, *Radical Evil in Soul and Society*, 148-151. Pagels’ ideas on the subject are found in her book, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1988).

controversy and critique, so much so that now, besides “orthodox Thomists, few philosophers, either theists or their critics, accept this theory anymore. Even those who, like John Hick, see some theological significance in it do not accept it.”³⁸

One problem with the privation theory, at least in terms of its importance for this dissertation, is that it simply does not explain the why in the puzzle of suffering. For if God is omnipotent, why couldn't he have created matter that did not tend toward nothingness and ruin? Why does not the “it is good” pronouncement in the Genesis creation story mean what it says? Or, even if there is something inherently amiss with matter, surely God could have used his providential control of the universe to keep such a wayward substance in check? Simply by declaring that matter tends toward privation is no more convincing than saying that humans tend toward sin. In a perfect world, created by a perfect God, the perennial question must always be, why? Rather than delve into metaphysical speculation about how and why matter tends toward evil,

why could not Augustine, in replying to the Manichaeans, had simply asserted that God did indeed create evils when he made the world but that he was morally justified in doing so since these evils are logically necessary to the fulfillment of a divine purpose that is surpassingly good? He provides exactly this sort of explanation in arguing that God' *permitting* evil to occur is justified. . . . The crucial issue in considering the question of God and evil is not whether evil is positive or privative, nor yet whether God directly brings evil into being or merely allows it to occur. It is whether there is morally sufficient reason for him creating a world in which these evils occur.³⁹

Robert Brown castigates Augustine's influence in the following manner:

We sometimes find philosophers or theologians wrongly attempting to provide a convincing explanation for why the free being in question first willed evil. We find them trying to make the first choice of evil seem credible to us, hence comprehensible. Augustine is the principle offender in this regard. Due to his

³⁸ Kane, “Evil and Privation,” 43.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

enormous influence in the western tradition his account of the origin of evil, together with the conceptual errors it embodies, has been endorsed uncritically by many others after him.⁴⁰

At the heart of the “conceptual errors” in Augustine’s thinking on the origin of evil is his inability to explain why sin was first committed. Augustine says that certain members of the angelic host rebelled against God in heaven before Adam and Eve’s primal disobedience. But this does not solve the problem, as Brown points out: “it is seemingly impossible to conceive how a being possessed of complete wisdom and blessedness [and this is how Augustine describes the condition of the angelic world prior to their rebellion] could ever choose to turn away and lose it. It is not plausible to hold that angels could be ignorant of the consequences of choosing to rebel against God.”⁴¹

Augustine, again attempting to explain “too much” about the mystery of evil, suggests that some of the angels were given a special “dose” of grace that enabled them to see the folly of sinning, and therefore to have the wisdom to remain in obedience to God, knowing that obedience would lead to eternal blessing. But this position, Brown rightly points out, makes God the indirect author of their rebellion. Or, at the very least, it makes him seem quite arbitrary, if not entirely capricious: “Augustine might have tried to justify this blatant inequality by pointing out that a being which was as a matter of fact going to fall freely couldn’t possibly have knowledge of its eternal blessedness (because it wasn’t going to possess it). But a wholly good God then should have withheld such foreknowledge from the good angels as well, to keep them on an equal footing.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Brown, “The First Evil Will Must be Incomprehensible,” 316.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 320.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 320.

The idea that Augustine sometimes relies upon, namely, that of pride, does not seem to work either, for pride is the result of sin, and angels existing in a state of perfect blessedness had no sin, hence they could not possibly fall into the sin of pride. Again Brown says: “[t]his substitution of ‘becoming proud’ for ‘falling’ or ‘first willing evil’ is attractive because, by drawing an analogy to the everyday sin of human pride, it makes Satan’s act more vivid, more appealing to the imagination, more amenable to dramatization. But it explains nothing, it in no way renders Satan’s fall understandable.”⁴³

According to Brown, Augustine fares no better when it comes to his treatment of Adam’s fall. Augustine is correct to say that Adam and Eve succumbed to the blandishments of the now-fallen Satan, so there is a reason for their fall, unlike Satan’s rebellion. But the same question arises: why would the deceits of the devil be effective against Adam and Eve in their pre-sin state, a state that according to Augustine was perfect and sinless? A free will cannot be misused if that will is in a pristine state, it would seem. Augustine makes one last desperate attempt to avoid this dilemma by suggesting that the fall of Adam simply is beyond the comprehension of his descendants, because we do not share Adam’s pre-fall state of noetic blessedness. Here Augustine may be right that the fall of the first couple may be beyond our ken, but it still does not explain why Adam fell in the first place. But, “on Augustine’s own account of the responsibility of the falling being there cannot be any such causes for [that fall], if there were, these causes would be created and moved by God who would then be ultimately

⁴³ Ibid., 322.

responsible for evil. The appeal to incomprehensible causes is an evasive move so worded as to disguise its illegitimacy.”⁴⁴

Plantinga’s Treatment of Augustine

With the above criticisms in mind we turn to Alvin Plantinga’s revision of his understanding of Augustine. (As stated in the previous chapter, the accuracy of Plantinga’s interpretation will not be discussed here). Plantinga is one of the premier Christian philosophers of religion of the past several decades. In fact, John Stackhouse has said that he is not only the best Christian philosopher of the last century, but the “most important philosopher of any stripe.”⁴⁵ In addition to having given some thirty named lectureships and having been honored with multiple honorary degrees, numerous “scholars, from a variety of disciplines, philosophical schools, and religious orientations have pointed to Plantinga as one of the most influential philosophers of religion writing today.”⁴⁶

Plantinga is both a Christian and a philosopher. It is Plantinga who, more than anyone else in recent decades, has revived and reclaimed the God question for modern philosophers. The long-standing academic bias against incorporating personal faith into one’s academic work led, Plantinga to remark on the appropriateness of using Christian themes in formulating a philosopher’s worldview: “[f]ollowers of Bertrand Russell and Madelyn Murray O’Hare may disagree, but how is that relevant? Must my criteria, or

⁴⁴ Ibid., 323.

⁴⁵ Quoted in James Beilby, *Epistemology as Theology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 29.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 28-29.

those of the Christian community, conform to their examples? Surely not. The Christian community is responsible to its set of examples, not theirs.”⁴⁷ Plantinga holds that one’s religious beliefs have an influence on every aspect of one’s life, including one’s academic endeavors. There may be such a thing as “neutral” chemistry or physics, but not in theology! “Plantinga believes that the theist and the non-theist have fundamental differences in their approach to epistemology. . . . And one’s answer to these questions [questions of faith] will affect your appraisal of what counts as a ‘suitable explanation’ of a given range of facts.”⁴⁸

Not only does Plantinga eschew the “god of the philosophers” for a full-blown Christian theism, he freely admits that he sees himself as a successor to Christian orthodox tradition. He believes he writes of what “is common to the great creeds of the main branches of the Christian church, what unites Calvin and Aquinas, Luther and Augustine, Menno Simons and Karl Barth, Mother Teresa and St. Maximus the Confessor, Billy Graham and St. Gregory Palamas—classical Christian belief, as we might call it.”⁴⁹ Much of Plantinga’s work has been apologetic in nature, though his brand of apologetics is of a very sophisticated type. Still, that he is a world-class philosopher, as well as a defender of Christian orthodoxy, must be taken into account when reading his work. Plantinga says on this point:

⁴⁷ Alvin Plantinga, quoted in *Alvin Plantinga*, eds. James E. Tomberlin and Peter Van Inwagen (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing, 1985), 301.

⁴⁸ Beilby, *Epistemology as Theology*, 37.

⁴⁹ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). This quotation is taken from the preface (no page number given).

[o]ne of my chief interests over the years has been in philosophical theology and apologetics: the attempt to defend Christianity (or, more broadly, theism) against various sorts of attacks brought against it. . . perhaps the main function of apologetics is to show that, from a philosophical point of view, Christians and other theists have nothing whatever for which to apologize. I can scarcely remember a time when I wasn't aware of an interested in objections to Christianity and arguments against it."⁵⁰

And while Christian apologetics is often aimed at the conversion of non-Christians, this purpose is not the primary one for Plantinga. The main role of apologetics in Plantinga's work "is to assist those in the Christian community who, for whatever reasons, have questions about their faith." Secondly, Plantinga sees the apologetic endeavor as "useful for those on the fringes of the Christian community, and perhaps even for those adamantly opposed to Christian theism."⁵¹

Much of Plantinga's reputation stems from his work on the problem of evil. Such is his influence in this area that "[w]hile some continue to believe that the logical problem of evil is unscathed by Plantinga's argument, the vast majority have accepted Plantinga's argument as successful. Perhaps the best evidence for the success of Plantinga's Free Will Defense is that since the publication of his argument, the vast majority of atheists who employ the problem of evil do so inductively, not deductively; evil is claimed to be *evidence against* God's existence, not a decisive *refutation* of God's existence."⁵²

⁵⁰ Alvin Plantinga, "A Christian Life Partly Lived," in *Philosophers Who Believe: The Spiritual Journeys of 11 Leading Thinkers*, ed. Kelly James Clark (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 33.

⁵¹ Beilby, *Epistemology as Theology*, 23.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 11.

However, in our post-Holocaust, post atomic age, many question whether or not anything resembling an Augustinian-style theodicy should even be attempted. Thus Terrence W. Tilley says that Plantinga simply does not take the “awful reality of evil seriously enough.”⁵³ Tilley adds that theodicies “are not addressed to people who sin and suffer. They are addressed to abstract individual intellects who have purely theoretical problems of understanding evil.”⁵⁴ Kenneth Surin takes a position similar to that of Tilley’s, chiding theodacists for their lack of realism and practicality.⁵⁵ Two things must be said in response to this. First, Plantinga is not doing pastoral theology. In fact, he readily admits that no theodicy would “give any hint as to what God’s reason for some specific evil—the death or suffering of someone close to you, for example—might be.”⁵⁶ Plantinga, as an analytic Christian philosopher, restricts himself to the theoretical/theological realm. But this is not problematic for his theodicy, for “metaphysical theories typically are not required to provide relief or consolation. . . . The dividend of a metaphysical theory is theoretical, not experiential or practical.”⁵⁷ Plantinga knows full well the difference between the formulation of technical philosophy and theology, and the practical world of pastoral care. Academic writing on the problem

⁵³ Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1991), 229.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁵⁵ Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

⁵⁶ Alvin Plantinga, “The Free Will Defense,” in *The Analytic Theist*, 25.

⁵⁷ Cress, “Augustine’s Privation Account of Evil,” 114.

of evil, he notes, will probably not enable the “believer to find peace with himself and with God in the face of the evil the world contains,” but that is not its purpose.⁵⁸

Another reason that criticism of Plantinga in this area is misplaced is because he, like St. Augustine, is deeply troubled by evil. Plantinga, like the Bishop of Hippo, realizes that suffering is a stain on God’s world, and something to which those antagonistic toward the faith could easily use in their assault upon Christianity. Plantinga has admitted that evil has always been “deeply troubling” to him.⁵⁹ One writer claims that Augustine was driven away from Platonism and Manichaeism precisely because he took the problem of evil so seriously. Evil is usually seen as the primary stumbling block to intellectually satisfying Christian faith, but a case can be made that it was exactly the seriousness with which Augustine took evil that made him embrace the Christian faith.⁶⁰ Augustine’s embrace of Christianity can be seen “as directly connected with the philosophical need to provide an account of the nature of things and the human condition [as marred by sin] which is both rationally satisfying and true to our lived experience.”⁶¹

Finally, there is a trace of realism, not naiveté, that runs through the thinking of both Augustine and Plantinga when they address the puzzle of evil. Though often accused of retreating into airy speculations far removed from the real problems of human suffering, a case can be made that, by writing so extensively on the subject, both men

⁵⁸ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 29.

⁵⁹ Alvin Plantinga, “Self-Profile,” in *Alvin Plantinga*, 34.

⁶⁰ See, for example, William Maker, “Augustine on Evil: The Dilemma of the Philosophers,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 15 (1984): 149-160.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 151.

succeed in making the dilemma of evil even more appallingly “real.” How do they both do this? By rejecting explanations that try to place the blame on anything or anyone other than humans, which the Christian tradition, and most other religions, clearly say the onus rests. Hinduism teaches that suffering is the wages of sin we have accrued in past lives, and the Manichees of Augustine’s pre-Christian period taught that humans were tempted by a malignant cosmic power to sin, but such theories do not resonate with “our sense of general human and personal accountability for wrongdoing, to our sense that evil comes from deep within us. . . . Regarding evil as a cosmic force or attributing it to matter as the antithesis of real Being divorces evil from individuals as individuals.”⁶² It is the same effort to absolve God of evil, and to place the burden of sin upon humankind, that we also find in Plantinga. The entire thrust of his work on the free will defense is to silence critics who think that evil is an indictment of God’s goodness.

Plantinga’s God, Freedom, and Evil

So, aware as Plantinga is of the age-old problems inherent in theodicy, he opts for a much more restrained treatment of the problem of evil. In *God, Freedom, and Evil*, Plantinga assumes the heart of the Augustinian freewill theodicy to be the idea that the world is a better place because of the freewill that humans have, even if they misuse it.

Augustine tries to tell us *what* God’s *reason* is for permitting evil. At bottom, he says, it’s that God can create a more perfect universe by permitting evil. A really top-notch universe requires the existence of free, rational, and moral agents, and some of the free creatures he created went wrong. But the universe with the free creatures it contains and the evil they commit is better than it would have been

⁶² Ibid., 152.

had it contained neither the free creatures nor this evil. Such an attempt to specify God's reason for permitting evil is what I [call] a *theodicy*.⁶³

Plantinga goes on to explain that he takes Augustine, and indeed, all those theodicians in the Augustinian tradition, to be advocates of a free will *theodicy*, whereas Plantinga is only concerned with attempting a free will *defense*. Plantinga the analytical philosopher thinks Augustine tries to do too much. Plantinga is only concerned with showing that his ideas might be plausible, not that they are the definitive explanation of the baffling mystery of the interplay between evil and freewill: “[q]uite distinct from a Free Will Theodicy is what I shall call a Free Will Defense. Here the aim is not to say what God's reason *is*, but at most what God's reason *might possibly be*.”⁶⁴ As a product of the post-Enlightenment, post-modern age, Plantinga attempts something far more theologically modest than Augustine had some 1500 years earlier. The collapse of foundationalism, the deleterious effects of biblical criticism, and the influence of existential doubt and despair over the past several decades have made certitude in theological enterprises a more precarious thing than in centuries past. All Plantinga sets out to do in *God, Freedom, and Evil* is to show that the free will defense, as he understands it, may be a live option in philosophy of religion. Specifically, he wants to show us that his free will defense is not logically flawed. This is a less ambitious goal, but his efforts must be viewed against most philosophical thinking since the time of

⁶³ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 27. This is Plantinga's first full-length book treatment of the problem of evil; his *God and other Minds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), contained only one chapter on the topic. *God, Freedom, and Evil* lays the groundwork for what will come years later in his magisterial trilogy, culminating in *Warranted Christian Belief*.

⁶⁴ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 28.

Hume, which dismissed God's existence as a *logical* impossibility because of the alleged contradiction between God's existence and the reality of suffering.

What does Plantinga's version of the free will defense look like? I quote him at length in order to allow him to define this crucial aspect of his thought:

So how does the Free Will Defense work? And what does the Free Will Defender mean when he says that people are or may be free? What is relevant to the Free Will Defense is the idea of *being free with respect to an action*. If a person is free with respect to a given action, then he is free to perform that action and free to refrain from performing it; no antecedent conditions and/or causal laws determine that he will perform the action, or that he won't. It is within his power, at the time in question, to take or perform the action and within his power to refrain from it. Freedom so conceived is not to be confused with unpredictability. You might be able to predict what you will do in a given situation even if you are free, in that situation, to do something else. If I know you well, I may be able to predict what action you will take in response to a certain set of conditions; it does not follow that you are not free with respect to that action.⁶⁵

Plantinga is saying several things. One, the freedom he is talking about is not contingent upon anything else; the freedom to do or not to do something rests entirely with the doer. This seems rather odd, given Plantinga's insistence that he is thoroughly within the Reformed theological camp. Yet there is no talk of God's predestinating action in the definition, nor am I aware that it creeps into his discussion of evil and freewill in any of his later works. So, at the outset, it must be realized that although Plantinga is, by his own definition, a Reformed epistemologist, one of the bulwarks of Reformation theology, the idea that God influences the actions both of the good and the wicked, is conspicuously absent from his free will defense.

Second, it seems to me that Plantinga is aligning himself more with the Arminian rather than the Calvinist camp, for he claims that even if the act of a free agent could be predicted (by another human or, presumably, by God), that does not render the action any

⁶⁵ Ibid., 29-30.

less free. This is precisely what Jacob Arminius taught, and what all orthodox Arminians have always taught; God foreknows the future, but he in no way forces his creatures to do anything against their will (although Arminius would admit that the Holy Spirit is an influence in a believer's life, the Spirit does not compel, in Calvinist fashion, the Christian to "do" anything).⁶⁶

Augustine, on the other hand, is a bit more ambiguous when it comes to the extent to which human actions are free. Sometimes he takes a position similar to Plantinga's, for he wants to preserve the integrity of human choice, while at the same time refuting the pagan notion of fate.⁶⁷ But this is not always the case. At one point in *The City of God*, he has this to say concerning the freedom of the human will: "[i]n [God's] will rests the supreme power, which assists the good wills of created spirits, sits in judgment on the evil wills, orders all wills, granting the power of achievement to some and denying it to others. Just as he is the creator of all natures, so he is the giver of all power of achievement, but not of all acts of will. Evil wills do not proceed from him because they are contrary to the nature which proceeds from him. . . to him all wills also are subject, because the only power they have is the power that God allows them."⁶⁸ Augustine here seems to want to have it both ways. In earlier passages in *The City of God*, he

⁶⁶ For a recent treatment of what Arminius and his theological descendents believe, see Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (InterVarsity Press, 2006).

⁶⁷ St Augustine, *City of God* Trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 1984), 191-92.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 193.

scrupulously defends the idea that the will is completely free.⁶⁹ Yet here he implies that the will is in some way shaped by God. And when he says that “evil wills do not proceed from him,” the only conclusion we can draw seems to be that both of evil wills and good wills originate with him. Thus, are those who do good truly free? Are their good acts truly the result of their sovereign exercise of free will?

To return to Plantinga, there is a further component to the freewill defense as Plantinga conceives it. He says that the free will defense is only really concerned with actions that involve issues that are morally significant. He writes, “an action is *morally significant*, for a given person, if it would be wrong for him to perform the action but right to refrain, or vice versa. Keeping a promise, for example, would ordinarily be morally significant for a person, as would refusing induction into the army. On the other hand, having Cheerios for breakfast (instead of Wheaties) would not normally be morally significant.”⁷⁰

Here Plantinga may improve upon the thinking of Augustine by defining what type of freedom he wants included in the free will defense. Plantinga is not so much concerned with everyday, mundane actions, but only those acts that have moral importance, which is what so much of the problem of evil question turns upon; why do

⁶⁹ Augustine writes, “we do by our free will everything that we feel and know would not happen without our volition. We do not say that everything is fated; in fact we deny that anything happens by destiny” (*City of God*, 192).

⁷⁰ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 30. Plantinga says there is a third thing to consider, the difference between moral evil and natural evil. Moral evil is produced when humans misuse their freedom, while natural evil is any kind of disaster or suffering which is brought about by non-human influences. More will be said about whether or not Plantinga’s free will defense can account for natural evil later in this dissertation.

humans choose to do things that have disastrous moral, or spiritual consequences? In short, why do they do evil?

With the above definition in place, Plantinga goes on to make the claim that, at the center of his free will defense is the idea that a

world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. Now God can create free creatures, but He can't *cause* or *determine* them to do only what is right. For if He does so, they aren't significantly free after all; they do not do what is right *freely*. To create creatures capable of *moral good*, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so. As it turned out, sadly enough, some of the free creatures God created went wrong in the exercise of their freedom; this is the source of moral evil. The fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong, however, counts neither against God's omnipotence nor His goodness; for He could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good.⁷¹

In this passage Plantinga is laying the foundation for his refutation of the Humean claim with which this dissertation began; if God is all loving and all good, why is there evil? Plantinga, like Augustine before him, is striving to maintain both God's omnibenevolence and his omnipotence in the face of the challenge of evil and suffering. Augustine notes the positive aspect of God's allowing His creatures to have freedom, even if it is misused: "God made man upright, with the same power of free choice [as God gave to the angels]. . . . God foreknew that man would sin by breaking God's law through his apostasy from God; and yet, as in the case of the angels, God did not deprive man of the power of free choice, foreseeing, at the same time, the good that he was to bring out of man's evil."⁷²

⁷¹ Ibid., 30.

⁷² St Augustine, *City of God*, 1022.

Both Plantinga and Augustine are careful to ensure that man's freedom does not come as a surprise to God; God foresees the rebellion of humanity. In fact, God has given us the ability to rebel if we so choose. However, at the end of the passage in question, Augustine indicates that man's sin is actually used by God for a greater purpose, and that purpose is made clear in God's scheme of human salvation: "out of this mortal progeny, so rightly and justly condemned, God by his grace is gathering a people so great that from them he may fill the place of the fallen angels and restore their number. And thus that beloved Heavenly City will not be deprived of its full number of citizens; it may perhaps rejoice in a still more abundant population."⁷³

Critics have sometimes complained that Augustine's treatment of evil seldom mentions God's cure for evil, the death of Christ. One may ask, "[w]hat place does Augustine give to the Cross in his discussion of the problem of evil? Apparently very little. This omission is rather serious since at the Cross God's goodness and omnipotence are brought into a dynamic relationship with evil."⁷⁴ But this passage shows that Augustine believed that the scourge of evil would ultimately be remedied by God's redemptive work in Jesus. Since this passage comes at the end of *The City of God*, the work in which he "gave full and, for all practical purposes, final formulation to his views on the fall,"⁷⁵ we can assume it represents his mature thinking on the issue.

⁷³ Ibid., 1022.

⁷⁴ Brochert, "Beyond Augustine's Answer to Evil," 241.

⁷⁵ Babcock, "Augustine on Sin and Moral Agency," 41. How Plantinga relates the work of Christ on the cross to the problem of evil will be examined later in this dissertation.

Plantinga, with the benefit of centuries of hindsight that Augustine did not possess, realizes that the free will defense is open to criticism, especially concerning the freedom to choose evil that God has given us. Writing a few decades before Plantinga, J. L. Mackie addressed the position that evil was inevitable, given the freedom of choice with which God has endowed us:

[i]f God has made men such that in their free choices they sometimes prefer what is good and sometimes what is evil, why could he not have made men such that they always freely chose the good? If there is no logical impossibility in a man's freely choosing their good on one, or on several occasions, there cannot be a logical impossibility in his freely choosing the good on every occasion. God was not, then, faced with a choice between making innocent automata and making beings who, in acting freely, would sometimes go wrong; there was open to him the obviously better possibility of making beings who would act freely but always go right. Clearly, his failure to avail himself of this possibility is inconsistent with his being both omnipotent and wholly good."⁷⁶

Plantinga appreciates the force of Mackie's argument, realizing that, if God is truly all-powerful, he should have been able to create humans to always use their free choice for good, never for evil. Plantinga notes that this idea goes back at least to G.W. Leibniz, who asked the same question as Mackie, but came up with a different answer. Leibniz, as a theist, was committed to the idea the God is indeed omnipotent, and that he is indeed omnibenevolent. Therefore, the world that he created must be the result of his all-embracing love and unlimited power. Thus Leibniz's famous phrase that this is "the best

⁷⁶ J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," in *The Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Basil Mitchell (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 100-101. The late John Mackie is one of the most prominent voices of the anti-theistic position based on the argument from evil. See also his classic *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and Against the Existence of God* (Oxford University Press, 1983).

of all possible worlds.”⁷⁷ Plantinga says that “[the] Free Will Defender disagrees with both Leibniz and Mackie. In the first place, he might say, what’s the reason for supposing that *there is* such a thing as the best of all possible worlds? . . . what is really characteristic and central to the Free Will Defense is the claim that God, though omnipotent, could not have actualized just any possible world he pleased.”⁷⁸

It is at this point that Plantinga begins to make his case that it was impossible for God to create just “any” kind of world. What he says in this section of *God, Freedom, and Evil* is based on a rather odd premise concerning the nature of God himself. I quote him at length here because later, I will present various critiques of Plantinga’s thought, and what he says in this passage does not bode well for one who claims to stand in the orthodox tradition of Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin:

[f]irst, we must ask ourselves whether God is a *necessary* or a *contingent* being. A *necessary* being is one that exists in every possible world—one that would have existed no matter what possible world may have been actual; a contingent being exists only in some possible worlds. Now if God is not a necessary being (and many, perhaps most, theists think that He is not), then clearly enough there will be many possible worlds He could not have actualized—all those, for example, in which He does not exist. Clearly, God could not have created a world in which He doesn’t even exist. So, if God is a contingent being then there are many possible worlds beyond His power to create.⁷⁹

Plantinga here is departing from the orthodox tradition of which he claims to be a part.

Haven’t most theologians considered God to be a necessary being? C. Stephen Evans notes that the definition of God as necessary means a “being whose existence is no mere

⁷⁷ Leibniz’s classic work is *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God and the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil* Trans. E. M. Huggard (Open Court Publishing Company, 1985).

⁷⁸ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 34.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

accident or contingent result but whose very nature is to exist necessarily. God has traditionally been understood as a necessary being.”⁸⁰ Creatures are contingent, their Creator is not! (Although Plantinga is probably right when he says that God could not have created a world in which even He did not exist. This is along the same line as God trying to make a square circle, or other such logical absurdities.)

For our purposes in this chapter the important thing is that Plantinga does not think God could have created just any world he wanted to. God could not have created truly free creatures, unless they could use that freedom to rebel. Or, as Plantinga puts it, God could not have “actualized” a “state of affairs as *Eve’s freely refraining from taking the apple,*” as this would be an example of God violating the free will that he himself had given her.⁸¹ Plantinga here is arguing against the idea of compatibilism, or the belief that human free will and God’s determining action upon humans are compatible and non-contradictory. Plantinga senses that Augustine may have slipped into compatibilism when he describes Augustine as follows: “Augustine sometimes seems to give something like a free will defense; there are passages in which it is reasonably plausible to interpret him as holding that it wasn’t within God’s power, despite his omnipotence, to create free creatures and also cause them to exercise their freedom in such a way that they do only what is right. Augustine isn’t entirely clear on this matter, however. He also displays a considerable list toward theological determinism, and towards theological compatibilism; the view that human freedom and divine freedom are compatible.”⁸² It is against the error

⁸⁰ C. Stephen Evans, “Necessary Being,” in *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics and Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 79.

⁸¹ Alvin Plantinga, “Self-Profile,” 48.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 41.

of compatibilism (as Plantinga sees it) that he contends, for he does not think that true human freedom is possible if either of these conditions obtain. In fact, Plantinga's entire free will defense can only function if freedom is construed in a non-compatibilist sense. Some philosophers think that free will and compatibilism do not contradict each other. Here we have something approaching the classical Calvinist position where God determines the actions of humans, but humans are still in a sense "free." Ironically enough, one of the main challenges to Plantinga's free will defense has come from the least Calvinist of sources, the atheist philosopher Antony Flew, who "has argued that if freedom really is compatible with causal determinism, then the Free Will Defense collapses because God could have had free creatures even if He caused them never to do anything wrong."⁸³

Plantinga claims that his position makes sense. By "freedom," he means freedom in the way the word is normally understood, and that precludes any kind of determinism. Plantinga here is relying upon a view of human freedom that was first proposed by the 16th century Jesuit theologian Luis de Molina. From him is derived the term "molism," (sometimes called "middle knowledge") or the belief that God "knows with complete certainty what every possible free creature would freely do in every situation in which

⁸³ Quoted in Robert M. Adams, "Plantinga on the Problem of Evil," in *Alvin Plantinga*, 227. Also See Flew's classic essay, "Divine Omnipotence and Human Freedom," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. By Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 144-69. Ironically enough, Flew has recently embraced theism, although of a deistic, not a Christian, sort. He recently explained why he abandoned atheism in an interview with Gary Habermas in *Faith and Philosophy*, which can be accessed at: <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=33>. See also *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*, by Antony Flew and Roy Abraham Varghese (HarperOne, 2007).

that creature could possibly have occasion to act freely.”⁸⁴ While someone like Flew might take the molinist assumption that God could view, with divine foreknowledge, all possible creatures, in all possible worlds, and then create the world with no evil in it, Plantinga disagrees, because “it is logically possible that there are no possible free creatures who would in fact freely act sinlessly in any circumstances in which God could create them. It seems to me that Plantinga’s argument is sound.”⁸⁵

If Plantinga has succeeded in showing that his free will defense is basically successful in proving that there are no logical inconsistencies with faith in God and the reality of evil, then how does he deal with the problem of natural evil? Ours is a world afflicted by disease, natural disasters, and horrible accidents. How does Plantinga account for this with his free will defense which is, he admits, focused primarily on explaining personal, moral evil? His answer is that, just as human beings commit moral evil, perhaps natural evil is committed by other free beings, beings with a much larger capacity for sin and ruin. Plantinga, following Augustine before him, attributes natural evil to Satan and the fallen angelic host. Plantinga has taken quite a bit of criticism for reviving a thesis that, for many scholars, has not been tenable since the Enlightenment and the rise of modern biblical criticism. Plantinga notes that several “people find this idea preposterous; but that is scarcely evidence against it. Some theologians tell us that this idea is repugnant to ‘man come of age’ or to ‘modern habits of thought.’ Again, this may be so (although it certainly isn’t repugnant to *everyone* nowadays), but it doesn’t

⁸⁴ Adams, “Plantinga on the Problem of Evil,” 230. See also the helpful definition of molinism in C. Stephen Evans, “Molinism,” in *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics and Philosophy of Religion*, 47, 75.

⁸⁵ Adams, “Plantinga on the Problem of Evil,” 231.

come to much as evidence. The mere fact that a belief is unpopular at present (or at some other time) is interesting from a sociological point of view but evidentially irrelevant.”⁸⁶

Again, it is important to remember what Plantinga is trying to do with this part of his argument. He is not trying to convince skeptics that Lucifer and his minions literally exist. He is, however, trying to show, 1) that they may exist, and, more importantly, 2) that if they may exist, there is no theological inconsistency in claiming that they could account for all of the natural evil in the world. Belief in such supernatural creatures may provoke skepticism from many an educated reader, but Plantinga notes, “it does not follow that we have *evidence* against their existence.”⁸⁷ Of course, there is no evidence that such beings do not exist, any more than there is evidence that God does exist (proving a negative is, of course, notoriously difficult!). Plantinga makes a point when he writes, “whether or not one finds the view in question plausible or implausible will of course depend on what *else* one believes; the theist already believes in the existence of at least one free nonhuman person who is active in history, namely, God. Accordingly, the suggestion that there are other such persons—that humans aren’t the only sorts of persons God has created—may not seem at all implausible to him.”⁸⁸ Here again we see the importance of one’s world view coming into play. Plantinga may make a very good point here. Why are so many people open to the idea of God’s existence, yet so adamantly opposed to the “superstitious” idea that Satan and demons may exist? The existence of a super-fiend is no more unlikely than the existence of an omnipotent,

⁸⁶ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 62.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁸⁸ Alvin Plantinga, “Self-Profile,” 43.

eternal God. Or, as Plantinga would put it, the existence of God, or of Satan, cannot be shown to entail any logical inconsistencies.

Conclusion

By attempting to prove too much, Augustine never really answers the question of why God has permitted evil to occur in His creation, and at times he implies that God may be responsible for the appearance of evil. Plantinga avoids what he takes to be this Augustinian dilemma by showing that God had no choice but to permit evil to enter His world. However, Plantinga's approach raises new problems, and these will be addressed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

Problems with the Free Will Defense, and Questions about Plantinga's Orthodoxy Arising from his Understanding of God and Evil

Introduction

Plantinga has tried to show that, despite decades (if not centuries) of philosophical hostility, that evil is not an impediment to faith in theism, at least not from a purely logical point of view. Many thinkers in the field judge his free will defense to “work” from a purely rational point of view.¹ Even the atheist Keith Parsons, in a book criticizing Plantinga and fellow Reformed epistemologist Richard Swinburne, says that Plantinga “has proven that ‘God exists’ and that ‘evil of the kind, variety, and extent found in the real world exists’ are consistent. The best thing we can say about a philosophical argument is that if we grant its basic premises and assumptions, then it accomplishes all it set out to do. Since Plantinga’s argument does this, it is a major achievement in the philosophy of religion.”² Still, there have been many voices raised his argument. In this chapter, I will examine some of those objections. First, I will consider the arguments of several critics who claim that, while his free will defense may indeed solve the problem of evil from a purely logical point of view, it does so at the cost of sacrificing Reformed orthodoxy, something that Plantinga claims to champion. Second, I

¹ In fact, the well-known atheist philosopher William Rowe has actually mounted a defense in favor of Plantinga’s free will defense. See Rowe’s “In Defense of the Free Will Defense,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 44 (1998):115-120.

² Keith M. Parsons, *God: and the Burden of Proof* (Buffalo, Prometheus Books, 1989), 125.

will look at other objections (logical and moral) that have been raised against his free will defense. Third, I will examine how Plantinga has responded to his critics.

Is Plantinga's Free Will Defense Reformed?

At least one critic, David Basinger, has attempted to make the case that the free will defense Plantinga invokes to “justify the ways of God to man may indeed be successful, but the God that it justifies may not be the God of orthodox Christian theism.³ Basinger detects in Plantinga so deep a desire to absolve God of moral responsibility for evil that Plantinga, in Basinger’s opinion, drifts far away from the God of traditional Christianity. Basinger says that the typical view of God’s providential role in history involves “the belief that total (specific) sovereignty is necessary to render other key orthodox concepts intelligible—e.g., the belief that the events of history are unfolding in accordance with God’s perfect, pre-ordained plan, the belief that God is in total control of all aspects of the lives of all individuals, the belief that God’s ability to respond to petitionary prayer has no non-logical limits.”⁴ This is a very Reformed view of the type of control God is supposed to have over his creation, as Basinger’s admitted reliance here on G. C. Berkouwer shows.⁵ Since Plantinga claims to be squarely in the Reformed camp, Basinger is not incorrect to suggest that Plantinga may have strayed from the Reformed fold. But it is not only the Reformed tradition that sees God as the omnipotent

³ David Basinger, “Plantinga’s ‘Free-Will Defense’ as a Challenge to Orthodox Theism,” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 3 (1982): 35-41.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵ See G. C. Berkouwer, *The Providence of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 141-60.

force in the affairs of men. Basinger cites a passage from the *Enchiridion* in which Augustine says “God is called Almighty for no other reason than that he can do whatsoever he willeth and because the efficacy of his omnipotent will is not impeded by the will of any creature.”⁶ Aquinas follows in Augustine’s footsteps here (and this will be important later, when I discuss Plantinga’s “extended Aquinas/Calvin model” for warranted Christian faith) when he writes “[n]ot only those things come about which God wills, but they also come about in the manner that God wills them to. . . . The ultimate reason why some things happen contingently is not because their proximate causes are contingent, but because God willed them to happen contingently, and therefore has prepared contingent causes for them.”⁷

Basinger’s contention is that Plantinga has so radically sought to preserve human freedom (thus absolving God of any responsibility for evil) that his “FWD can in no sense be viewed as allowing for any type of seeming compatibility between evil and the traditional orthodox concept of God.”⁸ One critic has said that there is an inherent contradiction for Plantinga in using the word “omnipotent” to describe God, when in fact

⁶ Quoted in Basinger, “Plantinga’s Free Will Defense as a Challenge to Orthodox Theism,” 36.

⁷ Quoted in Basinger, “Plantinga’s Free Will Defense as a Challenge to Orthodox Theism,” 36-37. Basinger notes that orthodox Arminian thinkers “allow us more significant freedom than does a Reformed theologian, but that even Arminius would agree with the following: “[t]he fact that a person (P) is free with respect to an action (A) does prohibit God from forcing P to chose to perform A...but it does not prohibit God from bringing it about that A...is in fact freely performed by P” (37). That all Arminian thinkers would agree with this is debatable, but Basinger is clearly correct in asserting that this view of God is well represented in the mainstream of historical Christian orthodoxy.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

God is, on Plantinga's account, limited in the type of creatures he is able to make. Plantinga's argument may be sound logically, but it does not fit with our understanding of the word omnipotence as it has been used in the Christian tradition.⁹ In fact, Plantinga's God "sounds more like Plato's demiurge than like the Judaeo-Christian God."¹⁰ Basinger, it seems, considers Plantinga to be out of the theological mainstream because he will affirm neither theistic libertarianism¹¹ (the idea that if humans have total moral freedom, God's power is necessarily limited), nor theistic compatibilism (the idea that "God is in total control of all states of affairs in the actual world because humans are not significantly free").¹² Basinger goes on to point out that Calvin was a strong defender of theistic compatibilism, and it is Calvin whom Plantinga claims as a spiritual forefather. Yet, Calvin, like all those who view God's sovereignty as absolute, was willing to do something that Plantinga is not, and that is, to make an appeal to paradox, for

the affirmation of compatibilism ultimately requires an appeal to paradox—i.e., and appeal to that which is inconsistent from a human perspective. . . since orthodox theism must affirm humankind's moral responsibility in order to make sense of orthodox concepts such as sin and redemption, compatibilism can only be affirmed if orthodoxy is willing to affirm the seemingly inconsistent contention that God can justly discipline (punish) individuals for performing actions which God irresistibly influenced them to perform.¹³

⁹ Omnipotence is defined as "the quality of being all-powerful, normally understood as the power to perform any action that is logically consistent with God's essential nature. From Evans, *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics and Philosophy of Religion*, 84.

¹⁰ Wesley Morriston, "Is Plantinga's God Omnipotent? *Sophia* 23 (1984): 55.

¹¹ This *is* what Plantinga's free will defense teaches, even if Plantinga never uses this precise term.

¹² *Ibid.*, 39.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 40. At one point in the *Institutes*, Calvin says God could have "made man that he either could not or would not sin at all. . . . But to quarrel with God on this precise

Thus Basinger can quote with approval the words of J. I. Packer, who defends this notion of paradox, even though it seems non-rational to the finite human mind: “[t]he root cause (for the seeming problem is the same as in most cases of error in the Church—the intruding of rationalist speculations, the passion for systematic consistency, a reluctance to recognize the existence of mystery and to let God be wiser than men, and consequent subjecting of Scripture to the supposed demands of human logic.”¹⁴

What should we make of Basinger’s charge that Plantinga has presented a non-orthodox view of God in his free will defense? I think he is correct that Plantinga has given us a theodicy that Calvin, and those who strictly follow his thinking on the sovereignty of God, simply could not accept.¹⁵ Another scholar has picked up on this, writing in 1977 that even though Plantinga was at the time a professor of philosophy at Calvin College, he “developed a theodicy that is fundamentally Arminian rather than

point, as if he ought to have conferred this upon man, is more than iniquitous, inasmuch as it was in his own choice to give whatever he pleased” (*Institutes* i. xv 8), quoted in John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 268. Thus, Calvin would clearly have difficulties with the Plantinga-style free will defense!

¹⁴ J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1961), 16. Basinger ends his article by claiming that Plantinga, though not a process theology advocate, can be viewed as a process theology ‘ally’ in some areas. This seems to me to be quite unjustified, for the central tenet of process thought is that God is ever-changing in response to the exigencies of his yet-incomplete universe. Plantinga never says anything like this. He only maintains that God cannot compel creatures to act against their own free natures, natures that God has given them in the first place.

¹⁵ That Plantinga has misinterpreted Calvin on a number of points has been suggested by John Beversluis, “Reforming the Reformed Objection to Natural Theology,” *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (1995): 189-206.

Calvinistic.”¹⁶ And Jonathan Edwards, another major influence on Plantinga, in his *The Freedom of the Will*, took the position that “our wills are free in what today would be called a compatibilist way.”¹⁷ But, “almost all contemporary Christian philosophers, even those who see themselves in the Protestant and Reformed traditions of Luther and Calvin, also affirm free will as libertarians construe it.”¹⁸ Plantinga, despite his Reformed heritage, seems clearly to be in this libertarian camp.¹⁹

Plantinga has claimed that there is no definitive view on human freedom among the major figures of the Western theological tradition,²⁰ stating that there is not “any one conception of God’s omnipotence common to classical theists.”²¹ But David Ray Griffin makes the case that virtually all of the great figures in Christian history did not espouse libertarian ideas. He stresses that Augustine, at least in his later writings, “clearly

¹⁶ J. E. Barnhart, “Theodicy and the Free Will Defense: Response to Plantinga and Flew,” *Religious Studies* 13 (1977): 439. Barnhart further points out that even Antony Flew, himself an atheist (until very recently!) and no defender of Christian orthodoxy, found Plantinga’s free will defense to be “incompatible with classical Christian theism.” (439).

¹⁷ Lynne Rudder Baker, “Why Christians Should not be Libertarians: An Augustinian Challenge,” *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (2003): 461.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 461. For example, Linda Zagzebski writes that the libertarian, not the compatibilist view of human freedom, is “central to Christian practice.” Quoted from her *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3. Plantinga adds that, “it seems to me altogether paradoxical to say of anyone all of whose actions are causally determined that on some occasions he acts freely.” Taken from *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 134.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 460.

²⁰ Alvin Plantinga, “Reply to the Basingers on Divine Omnipotence,” *Process Studies* 11 (1981): 25-29.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

affirmed” a compatibilist understanding of human will.²² Calvin of course could not be said to be other than a compatibilist, and Griffin claims to have shown “that Luther’s views on the issue are the same as Calvin’s.”²³ Luther’s own words on the topic are interesting: “[a]s for myself, I frankly confess, that I should not want free will [the libertarian kind] to be given me, even if it could be, nor anything else be left in my own hands to enable me to strive after my salvation.”²⁴ And according to Aquinas, the primary “Thomist contention is that every contingent event and proposition, including those involving free agents, *is completely determined by God; my action, even if free, I still determined by God’s action.*”²⁵ David and Randall Basinger affirm that Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin all affirm traditional notions of God’s omnipotence, while Plantinga’s compatibilist notions seem to be more at home in the realm of process thought.²⁶

Basinger is also correct to say that Plantinga rejects the paradox that allows the Reformed tradition to assert human freedom while at the same time maintaining God’s absolute control of human actions. But this is precisely what Plantinga intended to do

²² David Ray Griffin, *Evil Revisited: Responses and Reconsiderations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 64.

²³ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁴ Martin Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will in Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation* trans. and ed. E. Gordon Rupp (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 328.

²⁵ Thomas P. Flint, “Two Accounts of Providence,” in *Divine and Human Action* ed. Thomas V. Morris (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 165.

²⁶ D. and R. Basinger, “Divine Omnipotence: Plantinga Vrs. Griffin,” *Process Studies* 11 (1981): 15, 23.

when formulating his free will defense; he wanted to remove the logical contradictions and paradoxes that Christian thinkers have so often hidden behind when wrestling with problem of evil. One could say that Plantinga's thinking in this area is not Calvinistic, but that does not mean it is unorthodox. The Calvinistic insistence upon God's total control of the lives of humans (which finds its ultimate expression in his concept of predestination)²⁷ is a major stream in Christian orthodoxy, but it is not the only one stream. Thus the charge that Plantinga has given us an "unorthodox" free will defense fails. However, it is odd that Plantinga himself never seems to realize that his thinking on human free will is so at odds with the Reformed tradition, to which he looks to for inspiration and support for such much of his own work. Consider the decidedly non-Reformed tone of this passage that Plantinga penned: "if he [God] aims to produce moral good, then he must create significantly free creatures upon whose co-operation he must depend. Thus is the power of an omnipotent God *limited* by the freedom he confers upon his creatures."²⁸

When questioning Plantinga's orthodoxy, none of the critics seem to have picked up a few passages in both *God, Freedom, and Evil*, and in *Nature of Necessity*, which could easily be used to support the critics' case that Plantinga may be describing the "god of the philosophers," rather than the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Plantinga says when talking about God's inability to create just "any" world he pleased: "[w]hat God has created are the heavens and the earth and all that they contain; he has not created

²⁷ For a helpful summary of Calvin's views on the subject, see Edward A. Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 211-219.

²⁸ Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford University Press, 1974), 190.

himself, or numbers, propositions, properties, or states of affairs; these have no beginnings. . . . God no more creates the property of being red than that of omnipotence. Properties are not creatable; to suppose that they have been created is to suppose that although they exist now, there was a time at which they did not; and this seems clearly false.”²⁹

This may be a strange thing for an orthodox Christian thinker to say. If God did not create numbers, or the color red, from whence do they come? If they have no beginnings, are they in some sense co-equal with God himself? Calvin or Herman Bavinck would not say anything like this. More likely, they would agree with this definition of creation: “the divine causality by which God made the entire universe out of nothing and continuously sustains it.”³⁰

²⁹ Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 169. It seems to me that Plantinga is on firmer footing a bit later on in this passage where, still making his case that God cannot simply do “whatever” he please, he writes that God could not, at this moment, create a world in which Abraham did not meet Melchizedek, because this event has already happened; God cannot undo the past (170). I think Plantinga is correct here, but he does not go far enough. His argument should be premised on the idea that God cannot alter the past because it is His past; he has already allowed it to occur, and to undo it would be to violate his own will (or at least the will of Abraham and Melchizedek, which Plantinga certainly would not want!).

³⁰ Elizabeth Johnson, “Creation,” in *The Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995), 375. However, some scholars assert that the Hebrew of the creation account in Genesis does not teach *creatio ex nihilo*, but rather creation from the chaos of pre-existing material. See David Ray Griffin, “Creation out of Nothing, Creation out of Chaos, and the Problem of Evil,” in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 108-144. Griffin’s point is that once we understand that God is attempting to keep chaotic material at bay (material he did not create), the chances of a successful theodicy increase, whereas with the *creatio ex nihilo* view, there seems to be no reason why evil should appear in the “good” matter that God has created. Griffin goes on to offer a process theology type of theodicy. For a similar view on God’s struggle with creation, but from an evangelical perspective, see Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual*

But this is not to say that Calvinism has no influence at all upon Plantinga's free will theory. In fact, one of the major features of Calvinist/Reformed thought is the idea of the inscrutability of God, the idea that humans, trapped in finitude, cannot possibly fathom the depths of the divine purpose. Richard M. Gale suggests that Plantinga makes use of this Reformed tradition, and Gale labels it "theistic skepticism." Gale says there "are two components to theistic skepticism. The first is based on radical limitations in our knowledge of history, especially in regard to the remote causes and distant consequences of an event, the second on our limited ability to conceive of morally exonerating justification for permitting an evil."³¹ And Plantinga does, in good Reformed fashion, say that the puzzle of evil is often beyond our ken; he insists that we should not be surprised that we are baffled by evil. Indeed, puzzlement in the face of great evil is precisely what the Christian should expect:

From the theistic perspective there is little or no reason to think that God would have a reason for a particular evil state of affairs only if we had a pretty good idea of what that reason might be. On the theistic conception, our cognitive powers, as opposed to God's, are a bit slim for that. God might have reasons we cannot so much as understand; he might have reasons involving other free creatures—angels, devils, the principalities and powers of which St Paul speaks—of which we have no knowledge. But (granted that it is indeed possible that he has a reason) can we just *see* that he doesn't have a reason? Perhaps his reason lies in some transaction involving free creatures of sorts we have little conception of. Perhaps God's reason involves a good for other creatures, a good for some other creature such that God can't achieve that good without permitting the evil in question. Or perhaps his reason involves a good for the sufferer, a good that lies in a future life. It is a part of Christianity and many theistic religions to suppose that our earthly

Conflict (InterVarsity Press, 1997), and *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (InterVarsity Press, 2001).

³¹ Richard M. Gale, "Evil and Alvin Plantinga," in *Alvin Plantinga*, 54.

life is but a small initial segment of our total lives; there is life after death and indeed immortality.³²

As with each phase of his free will defense, Plantinga here is not claiming that he knows why evil, especially acts of horrendous evil, occurs; he is merely suggesting possible reasons why the suffering and misery we view from our limited human perspective may not in reality be pointless at all when seen from God's infinite perspective. Critics sometimes miss the point of what Plantinga is doing. He is only attempting to show that his free will defense does not contain logical contradictions; he does not claim that he has a pat theological solution for all horrible ills that plague humanity.

Finally, there is the question of, whether or not Plantinga's free will defense is orthodox in terms of the broader historical tradition, and the more narrow Reformed tradition of which he wants to be a part. As explained in chapter 1, at the heart of Plantinga's free will defense is his notion that that God simply could not have created just any kind of humans he wanted (i.e., the J. L. Mackie kind that never choose to sin). Yet at least one scholar has made the case that Augustine, whom John Hick has referred to as the "fountainhead" of the free will defense, did not seem to share this idea:

Augustine shows that he believes that Mackie's world, in which men have free will and do not sin, is possible because Augustine states that a special form of that world. . . in which men will have free will and cannot sin, will be actual after the final judgment. So the world which, according to Mackie, God would have created if he were in fact omnipotent and wholly good, would broadly speaking be acceptable to Augustine. Thus Augustine, in ironic contrast to the modern theists, believed that it *was* logically possible for God to have created the world under the conditions outlined by Mackie.

³² Alvin Plantinga, "Epistemic Probability and Evil," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. by Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 75-76.

After the Final judgment, such a sinless world in which humans nevertheless possess free will will become actualized.³³

Mackie it seems may have been in agreement with Augustine after all; the only thing they differed on regarding the potential for human sinlessness was *when* such a condition would prevail. Thus one scholar writes, “Mackie’s attack [contra Plantinga] does not threaten the notion of God’s omnipotence, since God could create such a world and will do so.”³⁴ According to Sung-Keun You, God does not so much tolerate evil because he has to, as in Plantinga, but rather because “God’s profound love, shown in Christ’s passion, requires that men be potential sinners. . . . This superior goodness is Augustine’s justification for the evil in the world committed by man’s free will.”³⁵ Human sin is not only a chance for God to show his redemptive love in Christ, but also to exercise his judgment upon sin:

Augustine’s God exercises justice, and Augustine believes a God who exercises justice embodies a more perfect goodness than a God who does not. . . . Augustine sees it as better that the world contained sinners so that God’s justice could be exercised, contrary to Mackie’s claim that it is “obviously better” if men always go right.³⁶

³³ Sung-keun You, “Why are there Sinners? Augustine’s Response to Mackie,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 37 (1995): 3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

Calvin notes a similar theme when he writes, “he so ordains by his plan and will that among men some are born destined for certain death from the womb, who glorify his name by their own destruction.”³⁷

Where Plantinga says that evil is necessary because God could not have made us any other way, Augustine says nothing of the sort, according to You. In fact, he quotes Augustine to the effect that “God did not lack the power to make a man who could not sin.”³⁸ This is not surprising, for, as Hick points out, Calvin, as well as Luther, greatly admired Augustine and “regarded him as presenting the best wisdom of the ancient Church, uncontaminated by the subsequent aberrations of medieval Scholasticism.”³⁹

Plantinga is coming from a very different place than Augustine in terms of their understanding of what God could have done with human freedom. For Plantinga, God simply could not have made humans other than he did. But Katherin Rogers has made a strong case that Augustine was always an advocate of compatibilism, even in his earlier writings, which are usually thought to be more libertarian and Plantinga-like. She writes, “Augustine, though he does not use the term which is of recent coinage, is what we today would call a ‘compatibilist.’ He holds that although the causes of human choices are ultimately traceable to factors outside the agent, this is compatible with agents being

³⁷ Quoted in Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 119. Calvin, of course, goes well beyond what Augustine taught about predestination, especially “double” predestination (see Hick, 121-126), but for our purposes, the goodness of God’s judgment is revealed for both Augustine and Calvin when God judges those who misuse their free will.

³⁸ Quoted in You, “Why are there Sinners? Augustine’s Response to Mackie,” 10.

³⁹ Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 115.

morally responsible for their choices.”⁴⁰ In fact, the Council of Orange in A.D. 529 raised the same objection to Augustine’s thought on this matter that is often leveled at compatibilists today: how can humans be held accountable if they are not wholly responsible for what they do?⁴¹ She notes that in *Grace and Free Choice*, Augustine even suggests that the divine will is in control of the wills of those who do evil. He provides a list of scriptural instances in which God has caused evil wills and consequent deeds in order to achieve His good purposes.”⁴² This, of course, is something Plantinga would never assent to. This is because in such a system as Augustine’s there is really no way to absolve God of the responsibility for evil, for it “leaves no room for any ‘primary’ agency on the part of the rational creature, from which it seems to follow that God is indeed, ‘the author of sin.’”⁴³ The same theme, of course, was taken up by the Reformers, especially Calvin, whose compatibilism placed even more of the emphasis on God’s will than Augustine did. Thus it is hard to fit Plantinga’s free will defense into the Reformed tradition, for his desire to make human choice entirely autonomous does not seem to mesh with the thinking of the giants of the Reformed tradition.⁴⁴ Lynne Rudder Baker

⁴⁰ Katherin Rogers, “Augustine’s Compatibilism,” *Religious Studies* 40 (2004): 415.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 415-16.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 421.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 423. Rogers stresses that although Augustine’s view of the matter of human freedom changed over the years, his thinking on the subject always was based on a firm bed of compatibilism.

⁴⁴ That Plantinga may have misunderstood Calvin on various other points has been pointed out by John Beversluis, “Reforming the Reformed Objection to Natural Theology,” 189-206.

lends further credence to the idea that Plantinga is at odds with Augustine's understanding of human freedom. She writes that "large stretches of the writings of St. Augustine. . . are congenial to a compatibilist interpretation of free will. This is especially so in Augustine's late anti-Pelagian works."⁴⁵ Even Keith Mascord, in a book that is largely sympathetic to Plantinga's work on evil and epistemology, can still make this trenchant critique of his free will defense. He writes that it is "unusual to find someone from such a strongly Reformed background suggesting that the granting of free will might (even possibly) be a reason for God's allowance of evil. According to traditional Reformed teaching, post-lapsarian human beings are not free, and are certainly not free to pursue their ultimate good. Their nature is such that they persistently and predominantly chose evil over good, and are damned for these choices."⁴⁶

Questions about the Logic and Morality of Plantinga's Free Will Defense

Even with the position Plantinga has taken regarding possible explanations for human suffering, critics have several profitable lines of attack. Although such attacks do not reveal Plantinga's logic to be faulty, they do show that perhaps Plantinga does not fully appreciate the severity of the attacks. For "when the atheologist [a term Plantinga

⁴⁵ Baker, "Why Christians Should not be Libertarians: An Augustinian Challenge," 462. Baker's article is concerned to show that Augustine thought that compatibilism was necessary for salvation, but his views on human freedom equally apply to the questions of evil and free will.

⁴⁶ Keith Mascord, *Alvin Plantinga and Christian Apologetics* (Paternoster Theological Monographs, 2006), 94. Mascord further notes in the same work that there "is some evidence that Plantinga has distanced himself from certain aspects of his Reformed heritage. . . . Plantinga is inclined to believe that human beings will have post-mortem chances to repent. Such a position clearly goes beyond traditional Reformed teaching, both in thinking that repentance is possible after death and in its apparent acceptance of chance or free choice" (106).

coined to mean the opposite of a theologian] gives up the claim that there is a contradiction between God's existence and evil's existence, evil does not lose the virtue of counting as evidence against God's existence, as a difficulty for the theologian to meet.⁴⁷ An argument may be logically sound, but still be beset by nearly insurmountable problems. One can take a position that does not violate logical possibility, but still teeters close to failing the test of *probable* truth.⁴⁸ William Rowe makes this very point when he says, there "remains, however, what we may call the evidential form—as opposed to the *logical* form—of the problem of evil: the view that the variety and profusion of evil in our world, although perhaps not logically inconsistent with the existence of the theistic God, provides, nevertheless, rational support for atheism."⁴⁹ David Ray Griffin concurs, noting that we judge theological matters the same way we would judge a case in a court of law. Anything is *possible*, Griffin points out, but the goal of the jury is to determine what is *probable*. Griffin asks of what profit is it to "invent merely possible hypotheses that show the existence of the God of traditional theism not to be logically inconsistent

⁴⁷ Phillip Bennett, "Evil, God, and the Free Will Defense," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 51 (1973): 40. The dean of religious skepticism, David Hume came to this same realization, it seems when, in his *Dialogues* Philo says "I will allow that pain or misery in man is compatible with infinite power and goodness in the Deity, even in your sense of these attributes: what are you advanced by all these concessions?" Found in David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. H.D. Aiken (London: Hafner Press, 1948), 69. This passage was brought to my attention in Ian Markham's "Hume Revisited: A Problem with the Free Will Defense," *Modern Theology* 7 (1991): 281. As Markham points out, Philo here represents Hume's own position.

⁴⁸ Plantinga's thinking on the probability of Christian truth will be examined in the following chapter of this dissertation.

⁴⁹ William L. Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 335.

with the existence of evil?” . . . there is no plausible way to portray the consistency of the existence of that God with the evil in the world.”⁵⁰

One such problem that still remains, even if Plantinga’s theory is logically coherent, concerns the amount of evil in the world. Granted, the critic will say, God must allow evil if he is to allow human freedom, but must there be so *much* of it? Rowe writes:

It seems quite unlikely that all the instances of intense human and animal suffering occurring daily in our world lead to greater goods, and even more unlikely that if they all do, and omnipotent, omniscient being could not have achieved at least some of those goods without permitting the instances of suffering that lead to them. In the light of our experience and knowledge of the variety and scale of human and animal suffering in our world, the idea that none of these instances of suffering could have been prevented by an omnipotent being without the loss of a greater good seems an extraordinary, absurd idea, quite beyond our belief.⁵¹

Are monsters like Hitler and Stalin necessary in order to ensure that human freedom is preserved? Some persons, like the just-named dictators, are “*conspicuously depraved*. And perhaps in the case of these agents the atheologist is right to maintain that either God should not have created these agents at all, or else he should have seen to it that they were placed in very different circumstances [presumably to lessen the amount of evil they would commit].”⁵²

The first part of this objection is, I think, easily answered by Plantinga’s argument. Plantinga would say that either God has given us freedom, or he has not. And if he has, then we should naturally expect moral exemplars like Mother Teresa, as well as moral

⁵⁰ Griffin, *Evil Revisited*, 45-46.

⁵¹ William L. Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction* (Encino, CA: Dickenson, 1978), 89.

⁵² George Botterill, “Falsification and the Existence of God: A Discussion of Plantinga’s Free Will Defense, *Philosophical Quarterly* 27 (1977): 127.

monstrosities like Hitler. The very concept of free will implies that one can use it as freely as one wishes, for good or for ill.⁵³

But the second charge is a bit hard for Plantinga to answer. If God foresees that a Hitler, or a Stalin, will be especially egregious in the misuse of their freedom, and that this will lead to the deaths of millions of innocent persons, many of them children, could not God have “made an exception” and interfered with the freedom of such men as these? After all, the biblical record is full of cases (commonly called miracles) where God intervenes in human affairs. George Botterill argues as follows:

if God is omniscient, then God will know in advance if a given agent is going to commit a very cruel and brutal action. But then in that case if, as the Free Will Defender maintains and God’s perfect goodness would seem to require him to maintain, God aims to achieve the maximum possible favourable balance of moral good over moral evil, then in accordance with this policy God ought to intervene to prevent the agent in question from committing the evil action that he had intended (or would have intended), even though this might mean restricting the freedom of the agent in question. But what harm is done by such a restriction of freedom on a given occasion? This would in no way inhibit free agents from doing moral good.⁵⁴

⁵³ In addition, when we take evil into account, the problem for the theist is not how much there is, but why is it there at all? The classical atheological argument, since the time of Epicurus at least, has been that the existence of evil, any amount of it, renders the idea of an all-powerful all-loving God absurd. See, for example, John J. Johnson, “Should the Holocaust Force us to Rethink Our View of God and Evil?” *Tyndale Bulletin* 52 (2001). Here, I argue against the now enshrined idea that the Holocaust, due to the sheer amount of destruction it caused, is somehow worse, quantitatively, than any other historical event. I argue that while it may be quantitatively worse than any other single instance of human evil, it poses no more difficulty for the theist than God allowing one innocent child to die. Both the Nazi genocide and the child-murdering lunatic raise exactly the same problem: why does God allow *any* evil?

⁵⁴ Botterill, “Falsification and the Existence of God,” 128. For a treatment of the concept of miracle, or God’s intervention in human affairs, see *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God’s Actions in History*, ed. by R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (InterVarsity Press, 1997).

This seems to pose a significant problem for Plantinga at first. For surely God could have stopped the Holocaust, simply by influencing the free will of one man (Hitler) in a different direction. The human race as a whole would still exercise their freedom unhindered, but millions of lives would be spared. But John Hick offered an answer to precisely this question in his now classic *Evil and the God of Love*, which is one of the best surveys of Christian attempts at theodicy currently available.⁵⁵ Hick, pointing out that Hume had anticipated Botterill's line of argument two centuries earlier, makes the salient point that "evils are exceptional only in relation to other evils which are routine. And therefore unless God eliminated all evils whatsoever there would always be relatively outstanding ones of which it would be said that He should have secretly prevented them."⁵⁶ Thus, if God had "prevented" Hitler, atheologians would ask why God allowed Mussolini; or if God prevented World War II by "tampering" with Hitler's freedom, why did he not bring about a similar change in the man who shot the arch-duke of Austria, thus avoiding World War I? "There would be nowhere to stop, short of a divinely arranged paradise in which human freedom would be narrowly circumscribed, moral responsibility largely eliminated, and in which the drama of man's history would be reduced to the level of a television serial."⁵⁷ Stephen T. Davis takes a similar position

⁵⁵ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1966). For those seeking a summary of attempts at theodicy, from Augustine to the 20th century, this work is invaluable. A large portion of the book (pages 37-89) is devoted to Augustine's various understandings of evil, and his efforts to create a satisfying Christian theodicy.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 327.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 327. The same point is made by Michael L. Peterson when he writes, "the troublesome assumption in the atheistic attack now is that a loving and just God would allow only a certain amount of evil and no more. But this is hard to justify. In principle,

regarding natural evil, noting that if God were to intervene to prevent things like hurricanes and floods every time they are about to occur, “the result would be an irregular and almost totally unpredictable world.”⁵⁸ Not only would this result in a chaotically unpredictable world, but, since “almost all natural objects are capable of producing harmful as well as beneficial results, virtually all natural laws would have to be modified, with the correlative modification of virtually all natural objects. . . . The whole matter becomes so complex that no finite mind can conceive of precisely what modifications [would be needed]. . . . And if the desired modifications cannot be detailed, then the further task of conceiving how the proposed natural world is better than this present one seems patently impossible.”⁵⁹

In addition to what would be the sheer impossibility of God’s tampering with the natural laws he has set in place, such tinkering would also involve drastic problems for

how much evil is *too much* for God to allow? Further, how we could ever ascertain that the present amount of evil in the world far exceeds the divinely set limit? These and other perplexing questions make it difficult to imagine how the atheist could ever establish such claims. There does not seem to be any clear limit placed upon evil by Christian theology. Neither is there any accepted method by which one could ascertain whether such a limit has been surpassed.” From *Evil and the Christian God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 198.

⁵⁸ Stephen T. Davis, “Free Will and Evil,” in *Live Options in Theodicy*, 78. Davis’ essay is an interesting combination of Plantinga’s thinking on free will, and Hick’s idea that suffering is necessary to promote “soul-building.” Davis, however, is not naïve about the value of suffering: “pain does not always help people to rise to new moral and spiritual heights—sometimes it destroys personality. But that it can produce spiritual good is important; this has always been a major emphasis of the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition. Suffering can be a stimulus to spiritual growth, an invitation to trust in God more fully. When we suffer we are often vulnerable and malleable, so suffering can be a kind of wake-up call that we need to grow spiritually. It can lead to repentance” (83).

⁵⁹ Peterson, *Evil and the Christian God*, 115-16.

human morality. For “moral freedom” would not be possible without the orderly, well-regulated world in which we live.⁶⁰ Richard Swinburne makes this point when he says:

If we are to know the effects of our actions, things must behave in regular ways. Only if my action is going to have an effect similar to that of similar actions done by others on other occasions, can I know what effect the action is going to have. Only if I know what effects my actions will have can I set about making a difference to things. It follows that if agents are to mould the world and themselves, the world has to be on the whole a pretty deterministic sort of place; deterministic laws of nature have to operate fairly universally. . . basically the world has to be governed by laws of nature if agents are to be able to control it.⁶¹

Eleonore Stump has noted that “natural evil—the pain of disease, the intermittent and unpredictable destruction of natural disasters, the decay of old age, the immanence of death—take away a person’s satisfaction with himself. It tends to humble us, show us frailty, make us reflect on the transience of temporal goods, and turn our affections toward otherworldly things, away from the things of this world.”⁶² And of course, as Plantinga has pointed out repeatedly, this type of paradise-like environment would not really allow for the free exercise of human choice at all.

Another attack that has been leveled at Plantinga’s Free Will Defense is the apparent pointlessness of much of the world’s suffering. While Plantinga appeals to

⁶⁰ Ronald Nash, *Faith and Reason* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 201. Nash further notes that one “reason people can be held accountable when they pull the trigger of a loaded gun is the predictability of what will follow such an action” (201).

⁶¹ Richard Swinburne, “Natural Evil,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (1978): 298. Actually, this line of reasoning was anticipated decades early by F. R. Tennant, who wrote it “cannot be too strongly insisted that a world which is to be a moral order must be a physical order characterized by law or regularity. . . . Without such regularity in physical phenomena there could be no probability to guide us: no prediction, no prudence, no accumulation of ordered experience, no pursuit of premeditated ends, no formation of habit, no possibility of character or culture. Our intellectual faculties could not have developed. . . . And without rationality, morality is impossible” (quoted in Nash, *Faith and Reason*, 200).

⁶² Eleonore Stump, “The Problem of Evil,” *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985): 409.

divine mystery here, the force of such arguments are nonetheless powerful. The argument does not tell against the logical consistency of Plantinga's position, but it does make the theodist's position less tenable. William Rowe has been one of Plantinga's interlocutors over the years, and he has raised the point that some evil seems to be so pointless, so gratuitous, that there cannot be any possible purpose in it.⁶³ For instance, a deer burning to death in a forest, or the rape and murder of a young child both seem to be examples of cruelty and suffering that have no purpose; they do not contribute anything positive in this world, nor can we possibly see how they could make a positive improvement to the world to come. Even if God has a purpose in allowing such tragedies, Rowe says, the tragedies in and of themselves are still an indictment of the God of biblical theism: "I don't mean simply that we can't see how some good we know about . . . would justify an omnipotent being's permitting [such evils]. I mean that we can see how such a good would *not* justify an omnipotent being's permitting [such evils]."⁶⁴ As Somerset Maugham famously commented, suffering often degrades, rather than ennobles, the sufferer.

Rowe's argument seems to me to be a powerful one, yet Plantinga spends only a few pages at the end of *Warranted Christian Belief*, addressing it. He states that such evil should not baffle us, because of what he terms the "epistemic distance" between us and

⁶³ For some representative works, see Rowe's "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* (1979): 335-41; "Evil and the Theistic Hypothesis: A Response to S. J. Wykstra," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984):95-100; "The Empirical Argument from Evil," in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment* ed. by Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca; Cornell University Press, 1986), 227-247.

⁶⁴ William Rowe, "Ruminations about Evil," in *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (69-88): 72.

God. Here, Plantinga of course is drawing upon a common biblical theme, that the ways of the Lord are beyond our capacity to comprehend: if “God *does* have a reason for permitting these evils, why think we would be the first to know? Given that he is omniscient and given our very substantial epistemic limitations, it isn’t at all surprising that his reasons for some of what he does or permits completely escapes us.”⁶⁵ Elsewhere, Plantinga points out that we have a similar type of suffering in the Book of Job. Job suffers horribly, and it is difficult for Job (or for us as the readers) to discern any purpose to his unmerited suffering. Plantinga again employs the idea that Job was epistemically challenged as he tries to seek an answer to the Lord’s purpose in his travails. God’s treatment of Job is admittedly baffling, but “the crucial problem for this probabilistic argument from evil is just that nothing much follows from the fact that some evils are inscrutable; if theism is true we would expect that there would be inscrutable evil.”⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 467. Plantinga despite the limited attention he gives to Rowe’s position, does list several articles from authors whom he considers to have provided sufficient rebuttals to Rowe, and a representative one is William Alston’s. Alston’s fairly technical essay amounts to basically the same position that Plantinga takes: God may have reasons for allowing gratuitous suffering of which we know nothing. Alston does make a good point, though, when he states that just as new vistas of knowledge have opened to us in the physical sciences over the centuries, there is no reason to suppose that similar advances will not be made in regard to human cognition and epistemology, which could render God’s seemingly inexplicable causes for permitting evil to become lucid.

⁶⁶ Plantinga, “Epistemic Probability and Evil,” 75-76. Aquinas, by contrast, went further than Plantinga, and said that such evil as Job experienced *must* be part of God’s plan to bring about greater good. See Eleonore Stump, “Aquinas on the Sufferings of Job,” 49-68, in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. Aquinas, Stump explains, took the position that so many interpreters have trouble with Job because they are looking only at his earthly troubles, rather than his eventual blessedness in the afterlife. This theme of the compensation in the world to come for the miseries suffered here and now, while not a major component in Plantinga’s thought, does appear at times, and will be addressed later in this dissertation.

Again, Plantinga seems to be correct that what seems to be pointless suffering does not *a priori* mitigate against the logicity of his free will defense. Still, the example of Job may not do the work Plantinga intends, for Job is a special case and not applicable to all cases of suffering, for several reasons. One, God appears to Job (most sufferers never have such an experience), and eventually is able to persuade him that his rantings against the Almighty are unjustified. Two, Job has his wealth and his family restored to him, a comfort many sufferers never receive. Third, Job was a “righteous,” devout man before his misfortunes made him doubt divine providence, so we can conclude that he didn’t suffer from quite the same type of epistemic distance as an atheist. Thus Job was theologically (not to mention culturally) predisposed to accept that there was meaning in his suffering, whereas an atheist would not, and would only become more entrenched in his atheism if he were suffering with no apparent purpose.

Another difficulty that could arise from claiming that evil is God’s inscrutable will could be that the theodist begins to do it so often that he or she becomes inured to the awful reality of suffering. Why seriously struggle with the hard theological challenges of God’s goodness and the world’s evil if the “inscrutable” nature of evil can be invoked to explain it all away? One could easily fall into a sort of morally objectionable quietude in the face of horrendous evil, as Barth accused Leibniz of doing: “at bottom he had hardly any serious interest in (and from the practical standpoint none at all) in the problem of evil.”⁶⁷ But few have accused Plantinga of this attitude, especially

⁶⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1, (quoted in Hick, *Evil and God of Love*, 154.). For a good summary of Barth’s own view of evil, which he called *das Nichtige* (“the Nothingness”), see Hick’s excellent summary in *Evil and the God of Love*, 126-44. Barth’s concept of evil as nothingness is obviously beholden to Augustine’s privation theory, although Barth seems to depart from Augustine by implying that God is, in some

since he has so often admitted that evil has long been a personal struggle for him as a Christian, and as a philosopher. Still, the danger of avoiding answers to the hard questions that critics level at Christian theodicians does, at the very least, lie dormant in Plantinga's view.

Richard M. Gale makes the case that Plantinga would have us believe that the inscrutable horrors that God allows should not offend the moral sensibility of the believer, since God may, and probably does, have good reasons for allowing such evil. Yet Gale stresses that it is hard for anyone to abandon the sense of morality we all share (e.g., it is wrong to allow a child to die), just because it is God who is permitting the innocent suffering. To abandon such common sense morality is to undermine the basis on which we engage in "our social moral practices. . . [and] is required for our entering into relationships of love and friendship with each other. Such relationships require significant commonality of purposes, values, sympathies, ways of thinking and acting, and the like."⁶⁸ A further difficulty that Gale sees in Plantinga's theistic skepticism is if "the bad things about the world should not be evidence against the existence of God, the good things should not count in favor of his existence. . . Maybe the good aspects of the world that these [theistic] arguments appeal to are produced by a malevolent deity so as to highlight evil or because they are necessary for the realization of an outweighing of evil, and so on for all the other demonodicies."⁶⁹

obscure way, responsible for the nothingness that occurs his creation, or at least that he was unable to create the universe without it. See *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 351-52.

⁶⁸ Gale, "Evil and Alvin Plantinga," 66.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

The most serious objection, though, for Gale, concerns the flippant attitude that he thinks Plantinga's ideas can lead to: "[t]he most serious problem for theistic skepticism is that it seems to require that we become complete moral skeptics. Should we be horrified at the brutal rape and murder of a child? . . . The result of this moral skepticism is a paralysis of the will."⁷⁰ Ultimately, Gale thinks, such paralysis of the will (because we stand helpless in the face of God's inexplicable plan) means that, not only will we have trouble entering into meaningful relations with others, but that it may be impossible to enter into a loving relationship with God himself. Gale wonders if "we humans can have such a relationship with a being whose mind so completely transcends ours, who is so inscrutable with respect to his values, reasons, and intentions."⁷¹

Finally, Plantinga has drawn protests from those who see in his free will defense a crass attempt to justify human suffering because such suffering will be more than compensated for in the afterlife. This is not a major point of Plantinga's thinking, but he does consider it when wondering why God allows so much evil in his creation. In fact, he never touches upon it in *God, Freedom, and Evil*, nor in *Nature and Necessity*, but it does make a brief appearance in the section on evil in his magnum opus, *Warranted Christian Belief*. There he opines on some of the things that could serve to justify evil. First he says that it may be that "our suffering is deeply connected with the possibility of salvation for human beings; perhaps we share in Christ's suffering in such a way that our suffering too is salvific, and perhaps even essential to the plan of salvation."⁷² But

⁷⁰ Ibid., 67.

⁷¹ Ibid., 67.

⁷² Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 488. This is a very Catholic-sounding statement for the Reformed Plantinga to make, and he admits he is here indebted to John

Plantinga also takes the somewhat standard position, common among Christians throughout the centuries, that suffering here on earth will be effaced by the glories of the life to come: “[i]t is plausible to think that the best possible worlds God could have actualized contain the unthinkably great good of divine incarnation and redemption—but then, of course, also sin and suffering. God chooses one of these worlds to be actual—and in it, humankind suffers. Still, in this world there is also the marvelous opportunity for redemption and for eternal fellowship with God, an inconceivably great good that vastly outweighs the suffering we are called upon to endure.”⁷³ Richard Swinburne argues in a similar vein and states that he is “inclined to think that the higher-order goods defense is an adequate defense to the argument from natural evil.”⁷⁴

Paul II’s Apostolic letter *Salvifici Doloris* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1984), 30ff. Plantinga refers to it as “a profound meditation on suffering and a powerful effort to discern its meaning from a Christian perspective” (488). In a similar vein, see Marilyn McCord Adams’ “Redemptive Suffering,” in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, 248-270. She notes that it is our experience of God as savior that gives us our faith, not “the observation that it is *logically possible* for an omnipotent and omniscient being to prove trustworthy. . . the typical Christian does not arrive at the conclusion that God is good by taking a Cliffordian survey of all the available data, tallying the evidence on both sides, and finding that the ‘scientific’ case for God’s goodness is stronger” (250-51).

⁷³ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 489. Plantinga is on biblical ground here and cites St. Paul who says in Romans 8:18: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us.” Plantinga points out that one of his Reformed forbears, Abraham Kuyper, took a similar position, stating that humans are to be envied even more than angels, for the “angels of God have no knowledge of sin, hence also no knowledge of forgiveness. Quoted in Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 489 (the passage is from Kuyper’s *To Be Near Unto God*).

⁷⁴ Richard Swinburne, “Knowledge from Experience, and the Problem of Evil,” in *The Rationality of Religious Belief*, 146. In the same essay, Swinburne sounds at times like John Hick, when Swinburne writes that good, as well as evil, help us to grow as persons, and thus evil “is necessary for free and responsible choice of a deeper and far more reaching kind which I call ‘choice of destiny’” (150). See also David O’Connor’s

The idea that heaven will compensate for present suffering was one of Marx's complaints against Christianity, and it is critiqued with devastating effect by Dostoyevsky, who sounds quite Rowe-like in a famous passage from his greatest novel—*The Brothers Karamazov*--in which the atheist Ivan asks his pious brother Aloysha: “[i]magine you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature—that baby beating its breast with its fist, for instance—and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? Tell me, and tell the truth.”⁷⁵ Aloysha then quietly admits that he would not consent to such a scheme of salvation.

J. E. Barnhart has raised several serious objections to what could be termed the “greater good” aspect of Plantinga's theodicy. One point he brings up is that the eternal sufferings of the unredeemed in the fires of hell seems utterly impossible to reconcile with the idea that God's creation eventually results in “greater good.” And while Plantinga, as far as I know, never says that the reality of hell is a part of the harmonious whole that God will eventually bring about, Barnhart is probably correct that this is a problem for Plantinga, who claims to be an orthodox Christian on all other doctrinal matters.⁷⁶ Thus Barnhart writes, “I therefore, challenge Plantinga and other such

“Swinburne's Greater-Good Defense,” in his *God and Inscrutable Evil* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 93-111.

⁷⁵ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, quoted in John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 385-86.

⁷⁶ Plantinga has little, if anything, to say about hell, which is curious given the fact that his theological predecessors, like Augustine and Calvin, were not reticent on this topic.

classical theists to show clearly what added value is gained in creating [persons who use their God-given free will to reject Christ and so earn for themselves eternal punishment in the place of ‘outer darkness’ that Christ himself describes].”⁷⁷ Similarly, Barnhart asks, how could those who have used their freewill correctly, and are assigned a portion of eternal paradise, possibly be happy knowing that many of their fellows, perhaps including many loved ones, are being punished so awfully for their misuse of their freedom? Church Father Tertullian, as well as Aquinas, had no difficulty with this idea,⁷⁸ but most modern Christians probably have a bit more difficulty with this concept than Aquinas apparently did.⁷⁹ Barnhart ends his essay with a familiar charge, namely, that Plantinga’s

⁷⁷ Barnhart, “Theodicy and the Free Will Defense; Response to Plantinga and Flew,” 442. In fairness to Barnhart, though, he admits that Plantinga “has himself never drawn this awkward conclusion” (444).

⁷⁸ As pointed out in Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Random House, 1989), 49-53. But the idea of the “joy” of the saved as they contemplate the damned is certainly not commonplace among Christian thinkers. See John J Johnson’s “The Implausible Foundations of Nietzsche’s Attack Upon Biblical Religion,” *Evangelical Journal* (2005): 82-94.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 44. Barnhart unfairly, I think, criticizes orthodox Christians for their willingness to accept the reality of hell “without so much as a moral shudder or even a moral ripple. They are apparently prepared to approve the torment of others in hell so long as its existence lifts their own level of happiness to the heights of ecstasy.” Few orthodox Christian thinkers have ever taken joy in the idea of hell. Even Calvin, when speaking of God’s decision to condemn some persons to hell through his predestinating will, referred to it as that “awful decree.” The universalist theme in some of Barth’s writing seems to suggest he was uncomfortable with the idea of eternal punishment. A movement has been well underway in modern evangelicalism over the past several years that question the reality of eternal torment. See, for example, John F. Walvoord, et al., *Four Views on Hell* (Zondervan, 1997). Of course, these works appeared after Barnhart’s article was published.

God is not the “all-perfect deity that both Calvinists and Arminians have proclaimed him to be.”⁸⁰

Plantinga’s response is that his view of God is not at all unorthodox. God has created humans the only way he could have. It is no discredit to God if we honestly admit that he cannot do the impossible; the classic logician’s question, could God make a square circle, comes to mind. Richard Swinburne, addressing those who equate omnipotence with the ability to do anything, elaborates: “A logically impossible action is not an action. It is what is described by a form of words which purport to describe an action, but do not describe anything which it is coherent to suppose could be done. It is no objection to A’s omnipotence that he cannot make a square circle. This is because ‘making a square circle’ does not describe anything which it is coherent to suppose could be done.”⁸¹

After all, God’s inability to control human freedom is a self-imposed restriction, not a limitation imposed upon God. Richard Swinburne notes that by creating us with freedom, God “puts outside his own control whether or not [evil] occurs.”⁸² Even Phillip Bennett, himself no ardent supporter of the free will defense, admits that it would be very problematic if God were to tamper with human freedom in a manner that Barnhart would

⁸⁰ Ibid., 453.

⁸¹ Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 149. Aquinas made a similar point, noting that “[e]verything that does not imply a contradiction is numbered among those possibilities in respect of which God is called omnipotent; whereas whatever implies contradiction does not come within the scope of divine omnipotence, because it cannot have the aspect of possibility” (*Summa Theologica* 1. 25. 3, quoted in Ronald Nash, *Faith and Reason*, 184).

⁸² Richard Swinburne, *Is There a God?* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 165. Swinburne takes Plantinga’s side in arguing that such self-limitation on God’s part does not constitute an unorthodox portrayal of the Christian God.

like. For even if God did interfere with our freedom (perhaps to prevent anyone from being consigned to hell, a theme that almost obsesses Barnhart in his article), what precisely would be accomplished by this? Human sin would still have marred God's creation up until the time of God's consummation of history. Bennett says "one might argue that God's making man such that he always chooses to do good would not be sufficient for guaranteeing the total absence of evil for it sometimes happens that one willfully chooses to do good and, lacking a sufficient knowledge of circumstances, one ends up (unintentionally) doing evil. This, so the argument runs, God would have had to give man omniscience (or something like it) as well as his newly-found benevolent disposition."⁸³

Bennett's idea here seems to fit nicely into what Plantinga, writing in the early 1980's, calls the "central insight of the Free Defense," and that is

while there may be many possible worlds that display a better balance of good and evil than does the actual world, it is possible that it was not within the power of God to actualize any of them—even though he is omnipotent. No doubt, for all we know, there are possible worlds in which there exist significantly free creatures — creatures free with respect to morally significant actions all of whom always do what is right. It is possible however, that God, even though he is omnipotent, could not have brought any of these possible worlds into actuality; it is possible that it was not within his power to do so.⁸⁴

Here is Plantinga's concept of "transworld depravity," which needs further elaboration.

The usually lucid Plantinga has always provided rather confusing definitions of this term.

I use the definition offered by George Botterill:

transworld depravity is what an agent suffers from if God knows that, no matter what the circumstance in which he places that agent, so long as the agent is free

⁸³ Bennett, "Evil, God, and the Free Will Defense," 47.

⁸⁴ Plantinga, "Self-Profile," in *Alvin Plantinga*, 47.

and unfettered, then he will commit at least one morally wrong action. So we suffer from transworld depravity if, not only do we commit at least one morally wrong action in this world. . . but we also commit at least one morally wrong action in an world in which we get the chance.⁸⁵

Keith Parsons notes that even in the world of science, one “of the various interpretations of quantum mechanics [Plantinga’s] ‘many worlds’ interpretation postulates the existence of an infinite number of ‘parallel’ universes. Put roughly, a possible world is a total state of affairs (i.e., one that either contains or precludes every other possible state of affairs) that either actually exists, as in the case of the real world, or could have existed but doesn’t.”⁸⁶ Speculating about what God could or could not have done in any possible world is a valid philosophical tool for Plantinga but, as Parsons notes, when dealing with the problem of evil in our world, the appeal to what is possible for God in a myriad of worlds may not be all that helpful: “it is the evils of the *real* world that create a problem for theism, not the evils of some merely possible world. To show that God’s existence is compatible with evil in the abstract is one thing; to show that it is compatible with evils of the sort that actually exist is quite another.”⁸⁷

The final critique of Plantinga’s free will defense concerns his explanation of natural, as opposed to moral, evil. As explained in chapter 1, Plantinga suggests that Satan and his cohort of fallen angels could very well be responsible for the natural evils that beset our world. Just because this explanation may smack of Christian “fundamentalism” does not render it untenable. He writes “St. Augustine believes that

⁸⁵ Botterill, “Falsification and the Existence of God,” 124.

⁸⁶ Keith M. Parsons, *God and the Burden of Proof*, 119.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

natural evil (except for what can be attributed to God's punishment) is *in fact* to be ascribed to the activities of beings that are free and rational but non-human. The Free Will Defender, on the other hand, need not assert that this is *true*; he only says that it is *possible*.”⁸⁸ David O'Connor, commenting upon Plantinga's use of Christian “mythology” to explain away natural evil, thinks the problem here is not so much the existence or non-existence of Satan, but rather his behavior. And the Satan hypothesis, he contends, proves too little:

what is odd about the Satan hypothesis is how well Satan behaves, how well Satan and Satan's evil followers cooperate with God by so faithfully, regularly, and dependably contributing necessary conditions for the reliability of the divine plan. The amounts, kinds, and distributions of evils in the world, as well as the ubiquitous orderliness of the world, as we find them in experience, are surely distinctly unworthy of a band such as Satan and Satan's followers. Satan, as described in the Satan hypothesis, would surely be quite a disappointment to Satan, if Satan existed. Satan might reasonably think that Satan was only a devil conveniently dreamt up by a theist, a devil-of-the-gaps, in order to further a certain theistic concept of the world.⁸⁹

O'Connor's analysis here is surely meant to be humorous, but at the same time raises the question, just how much does Plantinga accomplish with his appeals to the realm of the demonic to explain natural evil? Phillip Bennett thus asks, why did God create angels (and allow some to fall) at all?

To do God's work for Him? Surely omnipotence needs no assistance. And why were Satan and his chums allowed to continue to exist after their rebellion? Why weren't they simply poofed? . . . To suggest that the catastrophe in the Bay of Bengal a few years ago (was it 500,000 lives lost?) can be dismissed as the work of Satan and justified by holding that it is better for angels to be free and do both

⁸⁸ Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, 192. The portion of this book devoted to the free will defense (pages 164-195) contain basically the same points that he made in *God, Freedom, and Evil*, with the distinction that his treatment in *Nature of Necessity* is more technical and laden with symbolic logic.

⁸⁹ O'Connor, *God and Inscrutable Evil*, 146-47.

good and evil provided they do more good than evil...etc, is surely to try our patience and also incur our moral indignation.⁹⁰

Again, despite the sarcasm in Bennett's words, he reveals that Plantinga may be posing more questions than he solves by attributing the natural disasters we see all around us to the evil influence of fallen angels. Keith Parsons similarly points out that blaming demonic beings for natural disasters is an odd way to explain natural evil, for it seems to implicate the omnipotence of God himself. "Natural evils are caused, so far as we can tell, by the same fundamental laws of nature that explain all other natural phenomena. . . . The causes of evil are thus so intimately involved with (and often identical to) the causes of all other natural phenomena that to cause natural evil, it would seem to be necessary [for Satan and devils] to cause nature. But in that case, what becomes of the doctrine of God as creator?" At best we would seem to have a kind of dualism."⁹¹ Again, if Parsons is correct, it again raises questions about the orthodoxy of Plantinga's God. If Satan and his minions are allowed to control the very processes that regulate God's world, is God really the sovereign Lord of all creation as typically understood by Christian thinkers down through the ages?

Finally, one last aspect of the free will defense that is seldom raised is its historical basis, or lack thereof. The traditional Christian understanding of the Fall is that the first couple, two literal persons named Adam and Eve, initiated the ruin that has plagued humanity ever since. For St. Augustine, the historicity of the primordial pair was not a problem, of course, but for many today, it is. John Hick points this out and says,

⁹⁰ Bennett, "Evil, God, and the Free Will Defense," 49.

⁹¹ Parsons, *God and the Burden of Proof*, 124.

“[b]ecause we can no longer share the assumption, upon which traditional Christian theodicy has been built, that the creation-fall myth is basically authentic history, we inevitably look at that theodicy critically and see in it inadequacies to which in the past piety has tended to blind the eyes of faith.”⁹² I do not think that an insistence on the literalness of Adam and Eve is crucial to Plantinga’s free will defense, as it was in Augustine. For instance, Plantinga need not consider Adam and Eve to be historical; he could simply say that humans in general were given the sort of free moral choice that is typified in the Adam and Eve myth.⁹³ But, as far as I know, Plantinga never relegates the first human pair to the realm of myth.⁹⁴ In fact, he seems to consider the Genesis story to be actual history when he asks, “[h]ow could the very idea [to rebel against God] so much as enter Adam’s soul? In one way, this is easy enough to understand; we ourselves share in the same corruption, the same madness of the will. But Adam was made perfect, so how could it happen?”⁹⁵ Again, the historicity of Adam and Eve is not central to his theodicy, but Hick still raises an interesting point—how can we have a theodicy based on the “Fall,” if there never was such a Fall? Hick sees his own type of theodicy, based on Irenaeus’ understanding of the Fall as representative of the human race’s spiritual immaturity (and the need for subsequent moral growth), more compatible with

⁹² Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 248-49.

⁹³ For instance, C. S. Lewis did not object to the idea that humans have ascended from lower life forms, but he speculates that at some point God bestowed human consciousness upon them, thus distinguishing them from the animal creation. See his *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 72.

⁹⁴ In fact, Plantinga is quite conservative in his approach to the Bible, much closer to fundamentalism than liberalism. See, for instance, his “Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship,” *Modern Theology* 14 (1998): 243-278.

⁹⁵ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 212.

evolutionary thought, and it is one of the main reasons he opts for this understanding rather than the Augustinian one.⁹⁶ This is perhaps an area in which greater clarity is required of Plantinga.

Conclusion

That there are many critiques of Plantinga's free will defense, as well as rebuttals to the critiques, is undeniable. And although he realizes that his theodicy does not, indeed, cannot, prove God's existence, he does think that certitude of a type is possible regarding the Christian understanding of God's reality in the face of evil. It is here that Plantinga invokes the idea that the free will defense is part of the larger epistemological framework of the believer.⁹⁷ Plantinga says the following:

What I want to argue first is that if classical Christianity is true, then the perception of evil is not a defeater⁹⁸ for belief in God with respect to *fully rational* noetic structure—any noetic structure with no cognitive dysfunction, one in which all cognitive faculties and process are functioning properly. From the point of view of classical Christianity. . . this includes also the proper function of the *sensus divinitatis*. Someone in whom this process was functioning properly would have an intimate, detailed, vivid, and explicit knowledge of God; she would have an

⁹⁶See, for example, Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 243-261.

⁹⁷ This was not apparent in his early writings on evil, for instance, in *God and other Minds*, or *God, Freedom, and Evil*, and some of his earlier journal articles. But, by the time of 2000's *Warranted Christian Belief*, he had begun to see the free will defense as part of the overall picture of warranted beliefs that Christians can rightly claim are faithfully and truthfully held, even if they are not based on a classical foundationalist knowledge of "evidence." This topic of warrant will be addressed at length in chapter 4 of this dissertation.

⁹⁸ A defeater is basically any argument than weakens or counts against another argument. Defeaters come in varying degrees of effectiveness, depending upon their logical force. For example, for most of modern philosophical history, the evidential argument from evil was considered to be the definitive defeater against the existence of the Biblical God.

intense awareness of his presence, glory, goodness, power, perfection, wonderful attractiveness, and sweetness; and she would be as convinced of God's existence as of her own. She might therefore be *perplexed* by the existence of this evil in God's world—for God, she knows, hates evil with a holy and burning passion—but the idea that perhaps there *just* wasn't any such person as God would no doubt not so much as cross her mind. Confronted with evil and suffering, such a person might ask herself why God permits it; the facts of evil may be a spur to inquiry as well as to action. If she finds no answer, she will no doubt conclude that God has a reason that is beyond her ken; she won't be in the least inclined to doubt that there *is* such a person as God. For someone fully rational, therefore, the existence of evil doesn't so much as begin to constitute a defeater for belief in God.⁹⁹

So, according to Plantinga, more is involved than just logical gymnastics when attempting to answer the problem of evil. These topics, then, will be the subjects of my subsequent chapters. That evil is a stumbling block for the non-Christian is also inextricably tied up with notions of sin and proper noetic function. Mascord says that

The potential of the problem of evil to unsettle and even undermine the faith of a Christian is matched by an even greater potential to prevent faith in the case of a person who is not a Christian. Such a person is in a much weaker position, epistemologically. Without neither [sic] a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*, nor the benefit of the inward instigation of the Holy Spirit, people (on Plantinga's reckoning) are more likely to be disturbed by the presence of evil and suffering in the world. This is so much the case that an agnosticism about the existence of God and the truth of the gospel is likely to be a rational choice.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 485. Plantinga tackles the defeaters for Christian theism that critics have advanced in the following areas: defeaters from evil (458-98); defeaters from religious pluralism (437-57); and defeaters from modern biblical scholarship (374-421). What I take to be Plantinga's weaknesses when attempting to confront defeaters arising from religious pluralism and biblical criticism will be addressed in chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation.

¹⁰⁰ Mascord, *God and the Burden of Proof*, 108.

CHAPTER FOUR

Plantinga's Rejection of Epistemological Foundationalism

Introduction

As indicated in the previous chapter, there is more to Plantinga's free will defense than strict reliance upon formal logic. Plantinga also believes that his reconciliation of God and evil rests, at least in part, on one's Christian presuppositions. This is especially true when we enter the realm of Plantinga's Christian epistemology. In this chapter, I want to show how his epistemology is based on his rejection of classical foundationalism; how he replaces it with his concept of "warranted" Christian faith and the "Aquinas/Calvin Model";¹ and how his epistemological model responds to challenges from 1), contradictory religious truth-claims, and 2), modern biblical scholarship.

Foundationalism

Before examining Plantinga's notion of sin and the manner in which it prevents people from thinking correctly about such issues as the compatibility of the existence of God with the reality of evil, some background is in order. Plantinga's epistemological model is called the "extended A/C model" (after Aquinas and Calvin). By basing his epistemological scheme on the thought of these two pre-Enlightenment thinkers, Plantinga is attempting to avoid the trap that virtually all Reformed epistemologists think is fatal to the theological enterprise, that of foundationalism. Foundationalism is best

¹ As stated in the first chapter, I will not attempt to assess the validity of Plantinga's interpretation of Aquinas and Calvin. Rather, I will show how his interpretation of both men's thought helped him develop his epistemology.

defined as that Enlightenment enterprise that sought to find “common sense” areas of rational thought that all educated persons could agree upon. These universally agreed upon standards would then serve as the foundations for other, less foundational ideas. While “many beliefs are based on other beliefs, some beliefs must be held in a basic or foundational manner in order to avoid an infinite regress of beliefs. . . foundational beliefs must be highly certain. . . . Rationalist versions held that the foundational beliefs must be self-evidently true, while empiricists accepted propositions that are “incorrigible” because they are evident to the senses as possessing the requisite degree of certainty.”² John Locke is one of the classic representatives of foundationalist thinking, and the evidentialist approach is very much part of his approach. The “believer is required by Locke not only to defend his or her faith against objections, but to construct prior arguments to *establish* its truth. After the Enlightenment, any *defense* of religious faith must include its prior establishment with the arguments of natural theology.”³ The concept of “evidence,” so important to Plantinga’s concept of warranted Christian faith, was taken up by Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, wherein “rationality came to be understood as proportionate to evidence, thus too the rationality of religious belief. Accordingly, failure to make out, or at least to have available, a

² C. Stephen Evans, “Foundationalism,” and “Classical Foundationalism,” in C. Stephen Evans, *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics and Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 46.

³ Dewey J Hoitenga, Jr, *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 206.

sufficient case for such belief meant that the believer's epistemic right to believe was called proportionately into question."⁴

It is generally agreed that foundationalism has collapsed, and many "philosophers today are convinced that the ideal of classical foundationalism cannot be attained and that as a consequence we must either become skeptics or else embrace some alternative epistemology."⁵ Foundationalism was constructed on at least three faulty premises. First it was predicted upon the rationalist outlook that prevailed in the West, while ignoring the intellectual approaches of non-Western traditions. Second, foundationalism is, much like the logical positivist⁶ approach of the mid 20th century, self-refuting: what foundationalist belief does foundationalism rest upon? Third, the post-modern, deconstructionist approach to knowledge questions whether any thing like a commonly accepted body of knowledge even exists: "[postmodernists reject foundationalism in favor of some kind of pragmatism or coherence⁷ view of truth. They argue that there are

⁴ David O'Connor, *God and Inscrutable Evil* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 1998), 30. O'Connor points out that in the last century, Karl Popper took this idea but modified it somewhat, insisting that a "theory's epistemic status depends less upon how much the theory is confirmed by evidence than upon how well the theory is able to handle potentially deadly counterevidence" (30). See for example Popper's *Conjectures and Refutations* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 36-37. The problem of evil, for most of the 20th century, was precisely the kind of counter-evidence that atheists thought they had, and that Plantinga has done so much to refute.

⁵ Evans, "Classical Foundationalism," 46.

⁶ The logical positivists, who flourished in the mid 20th century, were those analytic philosophers who taught that the only statements that could be called "true" statements were those that could claim empirical support. The problem, of course, was that there is no empirical evidence for this claim itself, and hence the movement soon vanished once it was shown to be self-refuting.

⁷ A coherence view of truth denies foundationalism, and opts for the idea that "the structure of beliefs is like a web in which some beliefs are more central than others but in

no indubitable truths from which we argue, no set of beliefs that we can call everyone to affirm and from which we can build an argument for the Christian worldview.”⁸ Even Plantinga admits that, in 1973’s *God and Other Minds*, he was still under the spell of foundationalism, and the evidentialist approach toward the God question is evident in that work.⁹ He writes that “Evidentialism is the claim that religious belief is rationally acceptable only if there are good arguments for it; Locke is both a paradigm evidentialist and the proximate source of the entire evidentialist tradition, from him through Hume and Reid¹⁰ and Kant and the nineteenth century to the present.”¹¹

Plantinga rejects Lockean evidentialism, as have most in the Reformed tradition. “Protestants, at least since the time of Kant, regard the project [of natural theology and evidential arguments for God] as being at best useless, at worst blasphemous.”¹² Along

which some beliefs give mutual support to others as part of a network.” Taken from Evans, “Coherentism,” in *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics and Philosophy of Religion*, 24.

⁸ Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 175. The author goes on to make the case that foundationalism is not as “irrational” as many today believe. This idea will be taken up in chapter 5 of this dissertation.

⁹ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 81.

¹⁰ Thomas Reid (1710-1796), founder of Scottish realism, sometimes called Common Sense philosophy. In reaction to Descartes, he taught that our cognitive faculties were largely reliable and did not require “proof” of their reliability.

¹¹ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 82.

¹² Joseph Boyle, “The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology: A Catholic Perspective,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 11 (1982): 199. Boyle is correct that this is the Reformed view, but it is hardly the *only* Protestant view, at least not in the 20th century. Some of the major works of Protestant apologetics of the past century, written prior to 1982, when Boyle’s article was published, are: Bernard Ramm, *Varieties of Christian*

with rejecting the supposedly universally applicable logic of foundationalism, Plantinga also rejects the evidentialist approach to religious faith that is its corollary. Plantinga is not opposed to the classical arguments for God's existence; he has even published an essay on several theistic arguments that he thinks are rather useful.¹³ But he thinks they ultimately do not succeed, and indeed, are not required for the Christian to possess warranted faith in God. Plantinga's position, especially when he first articulated it, struck many as fideistic.¹⁴ But this is not a fair assessment of Plantinga, as James F. Sennett explains:

Reformed epistemology is not fideism. Fideism is the view that the canons of reason are inappropriate and inadequate to judge the propriety of theistic belief. According to fideism, the question, 'Is theistic belief rational?' is as inappropriate as the question 'Is the number seven green?' Plantinga sees the question 'Is theistic belief rational?' to be quite appropriate. His challenge is to those who claim that the only way theistic belief *can* be rational is by appeal to propositional evidence or argument. He argues that there are other, more basic or foundational, ways for beliefs to be rational, and theistic beliefs can be rational according to these criteria.¹⁵

Apologetics (Baker Book House, 1968), and Edward John Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948). The late 20th century saw a revival of sophisticated Protestant apologetic works, by the likes of William Lane Craig, N. T. Wright, and Stephen T. Davis, but the works of these men for the most part are post-1982.

¹³ Alvin Plantinga, "Two Dozen (or So) Theistic Arguments," in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. by James E. Tomberlin and Peter Van Inwagen (Hingham, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1985), 203-227.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Terence Penelhum, *God and Skepticism: A Study in Skepticism and Fideism*, Philosophical Studies Series in Philosophy, Vol. 28 (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983), 146-58.

¹⁵ James F. Sennett, "Reformed Epistemology," in *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader* (Eerdmans, 1998), 99.

Another scholar joins in Plantinga's defense, saying, "faith, according to the fideist, is a non-intellectual or non-rational factor that is not among the deliverances of reason. Thus faith is indeed a "leap" from reason, as in the case of Kierkegaard. Plantinga's claim, on the other hand, is that properly basic beliefs are rationally justified since they have conferring characteristics that make them epistemologically acceptable."¹⁶

Plantinga is not adverse to traditional theistic proofs. In fact, in his essay on the ontological argument (in which he makes some modifications to St. Anselm's original formulation) he points out that the argument, much like the free will argument, does not prove God's existence, although it entails no logical contradictions: "[a]n argument for God's existence may be *sound*, after all, without in any useful sense proving God's existence What I claim for this argument, therefore, is that it establishes, not the

¹⁶ Richard Askew, "On Fideism and Alvin Plantinga," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 23 (1988): 14-15. Plantinga may indeed be more "rational" in his approach to faith than Kierkegaard, but for an important article pointing out many similarities between Plantinga and the Danish thinker, see C. Stephen Evans, "Kierkegaard and Plantinga on Belief in God," *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (1988): 25-39. Evans notes that the two men have a similar notion of the noetic effects of sin:

"we can now say why it is that sin blocks the operation of the natural tendency or disposition which God has placed in humans. For Kierkegaard sin can be described as a failure to become one's true self or as a rebellion against God. These are basically equivalent because one can only be one's true self through being grounded in God, and God commands each of us to become our true selves. One becomes one's true self through the development of the right kind of subjectivity, through the right kinds of passion. To sinfully fail to become a self is therefore to lack the proper kind of inwardness and this means that one's ability to know God will be blocked or severely hampered. Obviously, this also explains the lack of universality. Since the disposition to believe in God only operates properly when the inwardness[i.e., the dependence upon God that both Kierkegaard and Plantinga champion] is present, the lack of such inwardness obviously means the operation of the disposition will be retarded in many. It does not follow from the universality of sin that this disposition would be blocked in everyone, nor that it would be retarded to the same degree in everyone, since sin may have various effects on the personality, and in any case God could providentially over-ride the effects of sin in some cases" (36-37).

truth of theism, but its rational acceptability. And hence it accomplishes at least one of the aims of the tradition of natural theology.”¹⁷

One of Plantinga’s fellow travelers on the Reformed epistemological road, Nicholas Wolterstorff, is also not as hostile to natural theology as it might seem at first. In fact, in a compelling essay, he makes the case that the natural theology of the medieval period (as exemplified by Aquinas) was a much different creature than was the rationalistic, evidentialist apologetics for and against God’s existence that emerged in the Enlightenment period.¹⁸ He approvingly writes of Aquinas that although

Aquinas believes that theism is indigenous to humanity, he never worries about whether those who hold to that indigenous theism are responsible (rational, justified) in so doing. And most emphatically his natural theology is not a response to such a worry. Accordingly, whereas the evidentialist apologist presupposes that the religious believer may believe only on the basis of good arguments, Aquinas nowhere suggests that the pursuit of natural theology is obligatory for all theists. . . . The goal of natural theology is not to protect our dignity as rational beings but to enhance our happiness as creatures whose felicity is to be found in the [prior] contemplation of God.¹⁹

Neither Plantinga nor Wolterstorff reject natural theology out of hand. Rather they reject it if it is used to bear too much of a burden, that of proving God as if his existence depended solely on such attempts.

¹⁷ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 112. The other traditional theistic arguments, the cosmological and the teleological, do not fare as well, and Plantinga says of the latter that “Hume’s criticism seems correct. The conclusion to be drawn, I think, is that the teleological argument, like the cosmological, is unsuccessful” (84).

¹⁸ See Wolterstorff’s “The Migration of Theistic Arguments: From Natural Theology to Evidentialist Apologetics,” in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Cornell University Press, 1986), 38-81.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

Plantinga's Goals

Plantinga has been roundly criticized for not providing the necessary resources for the Christian thinker to engage in what is normally called positive apologetics (i.e., offering reasons why Christianity is true and should be embraced by the non-Christian).²⁰ Rather, Plantinga, in good Reformed fashion, has tended to focus on negative apologetics (i.e., defending the faith from charges that it is false).²¹ “In defense of the charge that Plantinga’s work in the area of epistemology has done little to aid the cause of positive apologetics, it must first be said that Plantinga never intended it to fulfill that role.”²²

Michael Sudduth argues that the Reformed epistemologists in general, and Plantinga in particular, are not primarily concerned with apologetics; apologetic interests arise from their endeavor, but that is not their primary purpose. Sudduth says of Plantinga’s approach that it “is an epistemological project, the arguments of which *can* be deployed in apologetics in *support* and *defense* of the positive epistemic status of theistic

²⁰ See, for example, Keith Mascord, “Apologetics as Dialogue: A New Way of Understanding and Old Task,” *The Reformed Theological Review* 54 (1995): 58-59.

²¹ At least one scholar has asked the question, if Reformed epistemologists are distrustful of positive apologetics, why are they not equally disdainful of negative apologetics? A “Reformed apologist might, as in the case of claims that there is not enough evidence to support theistic belief, just as easily maintain that appeals to objections to theism are rationalizations and likewise refuse to answer such objections. After all, could not such rationalizations likewise be an indicator of someone not ‘functioning properly’? In other words, could not these rationalizations simply be masks to hide some sort of deep-seated resistance? If so, then negative apologetics also seems superfluous.” Quoted from Kevin Meeker, “William Alston’s Epistemology of Religious Experience,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 35 (1994): 91.

²² Keith Mascord, *Alvin Plantinga and Christian Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), 11.

and Christian belief.”²³ That Plantinga does not see himself as an apologist of the traditional sort probably stems from the fact that he has always been suspicious of traditional theistic arguments, partly because the standard of evidence that they are supposed to meet has always been set unfairly high.²⁴ “Reformed epistemology has been powerfully motivated by the suspicion that those who express *de jure* reservations about Christian belief apply double standards, requiring or epistemically legitimate religious beliefs conditions that could not be met by a whole range of ‘common sense’ beliefs whose epistemic propriety is not open to reasonable doubt.”²⁵

In an early article (1982), Plantinga wrote that “when the Reformed epistemologist claims that one can have basic knowledge of God—knowledge independent of argument or demonstration—she’s not doing apologetics and not trying to convince the skeptic.”²⁶ However, after 1982, Plantinga did change his position

²³ Michael Sudduth, “Reformed Epistemology and Christian Apologetics,” *Religious Studies* 39 (2003): 309.

²⁴ Mascord, *Alvin Plantinga and Christian Apologetics*, 120.

²⁵ John Bishop and Imran Aijaz, “How to Answer the De Jure Question about Christian Belief,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 56 (2004): 118. Ironically enough, evidentialist apologist John Warwick Montgomery makes the same point when he compares the New Testament documents to other historical documents from the ancient world. “To be skeptical of the resultant text of the New Testament books is to allow all of classical antiquity to slip into obscurity, for no documents of the ancient period are as well attested bibliographically as the New Testament.” Taken from his *History and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1964), 29. That Christian truth-claims are often held to ridiculously high standards is also recognized by Richard Swinburne, who accuses opponents of Christianity of practicing “epistemic imperialism.” Taken from his *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 199.

²⁶ Alvin Plantinga, “Reformed Epistemology Again,” *Reformed Journal* 32 (1982): 7.

somewhat on the value of positive apologetics.²⁷ Thus in 2003 he could write that one “of the best arguments (from public evidence) I’m aware of is Richard Swinburne’s in his book *Revelation*.”²⁸ Despite his praise for Swinburne’s argument, Plantinga goes on to say that “the most such an argument can accomplish is to show that Christian belief isn’t particularly improbable with respect to public evidence.”²⁹ Still, like Calvin, Plantinga will not dismiss apologetics entirely, stating that positive apologetics “can be of use in many different and important ways: for example, in moving someone closer to the great things of the gospel. Such arguments can also provide what John Calvin calls ‘helps’; this is so both for theistic belief and for specifically Christian belief.”³⁰ In a review of *Warranted Christian Belief*, K. Scott Oliphint (a professor at Westminster Seminary, a Reformed bastion) concurs, suggesting that arguments such as Swinburne’s give us at best only “probable belief.” He continues, “Plantinga then shows, responding to Swinburne’s probability argument in the latter’s *Revelation*, that such arguments cannot conclude with belief sufficiently capable of warrant; thus, we could not know the great things of the gospel.”³¹

²⁷ See Mascord, *Alvin Plantinga and Christian Apologetics*, 111-119.

²⁸ Alvin Plantinga, “Internalism, Externalism, Defeaters and Arguments for Christian Belief,” *Philosophia Christi* 2 (2001): 398.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 398. Towards the end of this article, Plantinga stresses that engagement with positive apologetics was never the primary importance of his endeavors (see page 399).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 385.

³¹ K. Scott Oliphint, “Epistemology and Christian Belief,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 63 (2001): 159.

Yet embedded deep within Plantinga's idea of establishing warranted Christian faith is his desire to establish *certainty* for the beliefs of the Christian. Swinburnian probability is precisely what he does not want to settle for. But how to do this if traditional appeals to evidentialism are ruled out, or at least relegated to secondary, or tertiary, importance? Plantinga wants to assign a far greater role to experience in the life of the Christian than either Thomistic natural theology, and certainly more than Lockean evidentialism, will allow. Yet he is not advocating a mystical, miraculous type of Christian experience. Nor is he recommending Christian "charismatic" experience as a legitimating factor in Christian faith (although as far as I know he never criticizes such ecstatic behavior). Rather,

there are at least two important ways in which his project differs from the argument from religious experience. First, Plantinga concentrates on common, everyday experiences of faith, rather than on the extraordinary, miraculous, or so-called mystical experiences that are usually the locus of arguments from experience. Second, Plantinga does not appeal to these experiences as theistic proofs in the natural theology sense. He is not claiming that these experiences can serve as the basis for arguments that God exists. He is not even claiming that these experiences can ever legitimately serve to ground belief for anyone other than the subject of the experiences. Plantinga's claim is that such experiences can and do rationally ground theistic belief for the subject, even if they cannot provide rational grounds for theistic belief for anyone else.³²

"Belief in God," Plantinga tells us,

means trusting God, accepting God, accepting his purposes, committing one's life to him and living in his presence. To the believer the entire world speaks of God. Great mountains, surging ocean, verdant forests, blue sky and bright sunshine, friends and family, love in its many forms and various manifestations—the believer sees these things and many more as gifts from God. The universe takes on a personal cast for him; the fundamental truth about reality is truth about a person. So believing in God is indeed more than accepting the proposition that God exists.³³

³² Sennett, "Reformed Epistemology," 99.

³³ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *The Analytic Theist*, 104.

Having said that the believer can experience God in such seemingly mundane events as this, how does Plantinga extrapolate them? They are not simply experiences that the believer has, Plantinga, maintains, but rather they are “warranted” beliefs.³⁴ Plantinga defines the idea of warrant as “a name for that property—or better, *quantity*—enough of which is what makes the difference between knowledge and true belief.”³⁵ What is the difference between knowledge and true belief? Plantinga uses the analogy of a sports fan who believes that his favorite team will win the game. As it turns out, his team does indeed win the game, so his belief was “true,” but it was not knowledge, for his team could just as easily have lost. “To count as knowledge, a belief, obviously enough, must have more going for it than truth. That extra something is what I call ‘warrant.’ As I see it, if there are any real *de jure* objections to Christian belief, they lie in the neighborhood of warrant.”³⁶

If a belief is warranted it can in turn be called, according to Plantinga, “properly basic.” A properly basic belief is one that “has warrant just if it is produced by cognitive possessor faculties that are functioning properly.”³⁷ Plantinga’s idea of properly basic belief results from his position that Christian beliefs are “not arrived at as a result of

³⁴ Plantinga began to develop his concept of warranted beliefs in *Warrant: the Current Debate*, and *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Since these books do not explicitly explain how warranted beliefs are relevant to the Christian faith, I will not be examining them in this dissertation. The culmination of these two books, at least in terms of the ideas they contain and their applicability to Christianity, is found in the final volume of the series, *Warranted Christian Belief*, and is the subject of this chapter.

³⁵ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, xi.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, xi.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, xi.

inference or argument, but in the [same] immediate way that beliefs arrived at through perception or memory occur.”³⁸ Such beliefs are produced by God and constitute “a properly functioning epistemic faculty that is aimed at truth.”³⁹ Finally, Plantinga says warrant, and proper basicity, can only be understood to be relevant when one’s epistemic, noetic faculties are functioning correctly. This he terms “proper function.” Plantinga would say that Christian belief, produced in a community of believers, and nurtured by the Holy Spirit, displays such “properly functioning” faculties.⁴⁰ And here, Plantinga “supplies one of the things that is lacking in Calvin’s epistemology. . . an account of how the restoration of ‘properly basic belief’ is achieved, in compensation for the damaging effects of sin.”⁴¹

The three ideas, warrant, proper basicity, and proper function, are all centered around Plantinga’s notion of what he calls the “extended Aquinas/Calvin (A/C) model.” The A/C *simpliciter* model gives credence merely to traditional theistic beliefs, while the *extended* A/C model supplies grounding for specifically Christian beliefs. And here Plantinga says an odd thing about both models: “[t]o show that these models are true, therefore, would also be to show that theism and Christianity are true; and I don’t know

³⁸ Deane-Peter Baker, “Plantinga’s Reformed Epistemology: What’s the Question?” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 57 (2005): 78.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴⁰ Plantinga’s thinking on this point is amplified by K. Scott Oliphint: warranted belief “is something that is instituted by God because, without such initiation on God’s part, we could not have belief suitable for warrant; the best we could have would be probable belief.” “Epistemology and Christian Belief,” 159.

⁴¹ Deane-Peter Baker, *Tayloring Reformed Epistemology*, eds. Peter Candler and Conor Cuningham (SCM Press, 2007), 8.

how to do something one could sensibly call ‘showing’ that either of these is true. . . . Of course, this is nothing against either their truth or warrant; very little of what we believe can be ‘demonstrated’ or ‘shown.’”⁴² Statements like these are largely to blame for so many people misunderstanding Plantinga. At times he speaks as if Christian faith is beyond the realm of provability, but at other times he writes as if his extended A/C model provides an assured bulwark for Christian faith. In another place, he says, “I don’t know of an argument for Christian belief that seems very likely to convince one who doesn’t already accept its conclusion. That is nothing against Christian belief, however.”⁴³

But the A/C model does contain proof of a sort, in that Plantinga’s model assumes that the Christian God has implanted within us the *sensus divinitatis* (This, of course, is an idea that is found in Romans 1, and also frequently in Calvin). The mundane experiences described above (e.g., the splendor of the starry heavens) do not “trigger” the *sensus divinitatis* within us, and “make” us believe in Christianity. “It is rather that, upon the perception of the night sky or the mountain vista or the tiny flower, these beliefs just arise within us. . . . The heavens declare the glory of God and the skies proclaim the work of his hands; but not by way of serving as premises for an argument.”⁴⁴ So nature, as in

⁴² Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 170. The idea that Christianity, like most of our beliefs, can only achieve a high degree of probability, never certainty, is the position taken by Christian evidentialist, John Warwick Montgomery. See, for example, his *Faith Founded on Fact: Essays in Evidential Apologetics* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson, 1978).

⁴³ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 201. Rather frustratingly, Plantinga’s entire argument in this book *is* an argument that Christian belief is true. Furthermore, he sometimes make statements that seem to contradict this one, and suggest that he thinks he epistemological system can virtually guarantee the truth of Christian theism. More on this in the following chapters of this dissertation.

⁴⁴ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 175.

Romans 1, is an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to convince us of God's existence. Plantinga says a similar type of experience happens to the Christian when he or she experiences guilt. The guilty feelings are not "proof" that an angry God is displeased. Rather, the guilt simply lets the Christian "know" that she or he has sinned.⁴⁵ Thus, the "*sensus divinitatis* is a belief-producing faculty. . . that under the right conditions produces belief that isn't evidentially based on other beliefs."⁴⁶ Note that it is not the majesty of creation, or the experience of guilt per se; these are only occasions for the Spirit to move the believer. The *sensus divinitatis* that does the work of turning the believer's mind to God.

On this model, our cognitive faculties have been designed and created by God. . . it is a blueprint or plan for our ways of functioning, and it has been developed and instituted by a conscious, intelligent agent. The purpose of the *sensus divinitatis* is to enable us to have true beliefs about God; when it functions properly, it ordinarily *does* produce true beliefs about God. These beliefs therefore meet the conditions for warrant; if the beliefs produced are strong enough, then they constitute knowledge.⁴⁷

But what happens if this "blueprint" does not function correctly? This is precisely what has happened, Plantinga alleges, as a result of humanity's fall. One of the most important points of Plantinga's free will defense, as well as his entire Christian epistemology, concerns one's cognitive functions, especially what have been called the "noetic effects of sin" that resulted from man's primordial disobedience against God. Plantinga is on firm Augustinian ground here, for "[u]ntil people were redeemed from their sin, argued Augustine, their minds would remain unhealed and they would continue

⁴⁵ Ibid., 175.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 179.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 179.

to suffer the noetic effects of sin. . . . Augustine taught that whereas the sin of unbelief closes the door to right knowledge of God, faith opens this door and provides the understanding with access to right knowledge of God.”⁴⁸

Plantinga, following Calvin and most major Reformed thinkers (all of whom had a strong Augustinian understanding of the nature of sin), sees the fall of man as something which did catastrophic damage to our reasoning process. Calvin taught that when “distorted by sin the *sensus divinitatis* issues in degrading and frightening inversions of true reverence, secret dread and open idolatry.”⁴⁹ The Dutch thinker Abraham Kuyper, who led the nineteenth-century Calvinist revival in Holland (and who has been a major influence on twentieth-century Reformed epistemology), taught that sin had so damaging an effect on the human mind that it “breaks humanity into two, and repeals the unity of the human consciousness.”⁵⁰ Kuyper was attempting to take

⁴⁸ Stephen K. Maroney, *The Noetic Effects of Sin* (Lexington Books, 1999), 126.

⁴⁹ Edward A. Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 54. This work is a thorough examination of Calvin’s understanding of man’s knowledge of God as Creator, and as Redeemer (following the general outline of the *Institutes*).

⁵⁰ Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, trans. J. H. De Vries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 152. So radical is the sin-induced demarcation between Christian and non-Christian, Kuyper taught, that Christians think “the world in its present state is abnormal, that is, fallen and in need of renewal. Conversely, non-Christian thinkers may be characterized as normalists in the sense that they believe the world in its present state is normal, that is, not in need of radical renewal.” Quoted from Stephen K. Maroney, *The Noetic Effects of Sin*. Maroney points out that Emil Brunner made a similar distinction in terms of how sin adversely affects various areas of knowledge in the lives of unbelievers (31-33). This kind of thinking, taken to its extreme, finds expression in the thought of Cornelius Van Til who, according to Maroney, even goes beyond Kuyper in arguing for an antithesis even in mathematics! An example is the following statement from Van Til: “the fact that two times two are four does not mean the same thing to you as a believer and to someone else as an unbeliever.” This comment, found in footnote 21 of page 43 of Maroney’s book, has its original source in Cornelius Van Til,

seriously the teaching on sin as he understood it in scripture and in Reformed thinkers like Calvin, but a case can also be made that he was responding to the influence of Kant. “Kant’s contention that theoretical reason is unable to secure knowledge of noumenal reality became for Kuyper an opportunity to exclude reason from any assessment of revelation. Since Kant had (for Kuyper at least) proved that one cannot know God by the use of natural reason, special revelation became particularly necessary.”⁵¹ Thus, those who think that the reality of evil “disproves” the existence of God are not only bad philosophers, Plantinga would say, they are also suffering from the deleterious effects of a sin-beclouded mind that does not permit them to detect God’s providence because human evil and suffering tell them belief in God is not acceptable for a “rational person.”⁵² Calvin, of course, based his ideas of man’s fallen nature on St. Paul,

“Antitheses in Education,” in L. Berkhof and C. Van Til, *Foundations of Christian Education* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1990), 7.

⁵¹ Mascord, *Alvin Plantinga and Christian Apologetics*, 18. Oddly enough, Cornelius Van Til, a disciple of Kuyper and the one who is generally credited with the neo-Reformed system of apologetics known as presuppositionalism, is almost never mentioned by Plantinga as an influence on his own thought, even though Plantinga’s disregard for an evidentialist approach to apologetics and epistemology is so similar to Van Til’s. Plantinga only mentions him in passing once or twice, for instance, in *Warranted Christian Belief*, 217. Thus Oliphint notes that it “is possible that what Plantinga is attempting to set forth [with his epistemology] is akin to Van Til in certain important aspects. See Oliphint’s review of *Warranted Christian Belief*, “Epistemology and Christian Belief,” 157. Oliphint suggests that similarities in the thought of Van Til and Plantinga are also exposed in David Reiter, “Plantinga on the Epistemic Implications of Naturalism,” *The Journal of Philosophical Research* 25 (2000): 141-47.

⁵² Of course, Plantinga, like all Reformed thinkers, runs the risk of not realizing just how his own noetic structures have been damaged by sin: “The great danger for Christians here is that of a Pharisaic finger-pointing at the way sin may distort unbelievers’ thoughts without attending to how sin distorts their own thought. (precisely this tendency has been manifested in the writings of Kuyper, Van Til, and others in the neo-Calvinist tradition).” From Maroney, *The Noetic Effects of Sin*, 35.

especially what Paul says in Romans chapter 1. There, Paul teaches that we have an innate knowledge of God. It is a knowledge that precedes any divine revelation that God chooses to give to us. Indeed, Paul hints in Acts 17 that even the pagans he encounters at the Areopagus know something of the true God, even if their knowledge is far from complete. Thus, for Paul, and for Calvin, to say that evil proves God does not exist is an absurdity, since the knowledge that God exists is part of our noetic structure. Calvin echoes Paul's teaching in Romans in this passage from the *Institutes*:

Men of sound judgment will always be sure that a sense of divinity which can never be effaced is engraved upon men's minds. Indeed, the perversity of the impious, who though they struggle furiously are unable to extricate themselves from the fear of God, is abundant testimony that this conviction, namely, that there is some God, is naturally inborn in all, and is fixed deep within, as it were in the very marrow. . . . From this we conclude that it is not a doctrine that must first be learned in school, but one of which each of us is master from his mother's womb and which nature itself permits no one to forget, although many strive with every nerve to this end.⁵³

That Plantinga's model would be named for Calvin is quite appropriate, although Aquinas's influence on the model is harder to fathom. Plantinga writes, "Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin concur on the claim that there is a kind of natural knowledge of God (and anything on which Calvin and Aquinas are in accord is something to which we had better pay careful attention)."⁵⁴ Aquinas's understanding of the noetic effects of sin is

⁵³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I iii, 3 quoted in Hoitenga, *From Plato to Plantinga*.

⁵⁴ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 170. Why Plantinga includes Aquinas in all of this is rather odd, since Calvin, and not Aquinas, is really the basis for so much of Plantinga's thought. In fact, Aquinas was sympathetic to natural theology, and his "Five Proofs" for God's existence are among the most famous apologetic arguments for theism in Christian history. And of course, it is precisely such arguments that Plantinga and others in the Reformed epistemology school reject! In fact, "Aquinas gives an account of rational belief not envisaged by foundationalism. Christian faith is not rational because its truths are evident, nor because there is proportionate evidence for those truths, but

nowhere near as strong as Calvin's, but it is a mistake to suppose, as some commentators on Aquinas have, that the Angelic Doctor thought our minds were not damaged by sin.⁵⁵ In fact, commenting on the Fall, Aquinas wrote "all powers of the soul have been left to some extent destitute of their proper order. . . reason is dulled by sin, especially in moral decisions."⁵⁶

Following Aquinas, and especially Calvin, Plantinga writes that our "fall into sin has had cataclysmic consequences, both affective and cognitive. . . . Our original knowledge of God and of his marvelous beauty, glory, and loveliness has been severely compromised. . . . In particular, the *sensus divinitatis* has been damaged and deformed;

because the evidence is sufficient to enable the heart to respond to God's invitation to believe what is not known. Given this alternative, Aquinas feels no compulsion to locate the knowledge of God in the noetic foundations in order to avoid holding that God's existence is uncertain in the absence of compelling proofs." From Joseph Boyle "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology: A Catholic Perspective," 209. While this passage would seem to suggest that Aquinas is an unlikely model for Plantinga's epistemological edifice, the following passage, from the same article, captures the importance of faith for Aquinas as the most important factor in the Christian's acceptance of Christian truth, and has more of a Plantingian ring to it: "Aquinas holds that this faith is certain; in fact faith is more certain than knowledge gained by philosophical thinking. . . . Furthermore, this firm adherence to the truths of faith is stronger than a person's assent to any naturally known proposition; the certitude of faith is unshakeable. The ultimate reason for this is the fact that the assent of faith is rooted in God, the first truth, and is confirmed by grace" (208). It is this root in Aquinas's thought, the idea that faith has precedence over any type of evidentialist argument, that apparently appeals to Plantinga.

⁵⁵ Maroney, *The Noetic Effects of Sin*, 126-27.

⁵⁶ From *Summa Theologica*, I-II, Question 85, Article 3 (quoted in Maroney, *The Noetic Effects of Sin* 127). Still, Aquinas and Calvin make for odd bedfellows at times, for instance, concerning their view of the Bible: "Aquinas places more emphasis on the external, objective evidence for the divine origin of Scripture, while Calvin is scornful of such evidence and feels that the inner witness of the Spirit suffices for certainty, and indeed for knowledge." Quoted from Laura L. Garcia, "Natural Theology and the Reformed Objection," in *Christian Perspectives on Religious Knowledge*, ed. C. Stephen Evans and Merold Westphal (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1993), 129.

because of the fall, we no longer know God in the same natural and unproblematic way in which we know each other and the world around us.”⁵⁷ Why do atheologians like J. L. Mackie or Michael Martin⁵⁸ refuse to see the truth of Christian theism? Plantinga would answer that “sin induces in us a *resistance* to the deliverances of the *sensus divinitatis*. . . we don’t *want* to pay attention to its deliverances.”⁵⁹ Leveling his epistemic arsenal at his non-believing colleagues, Plantinga writes that “in academia, there is widespread doubt and agnosticism with respect to the very existence of God. But if we don’t know that there is such a person as God, we don’t know the first thing (the most important thing) about ourselves, each other, and the world.”⁶⁰

Plantinga’s A/C model does not depend entirely upon the *sensus divinitatis*, though. The triumvirate of the Holy Spirit, the Bible, and faith, also figure significantly in his establishment of the A/C model. Concerning the Holy Spirit, he writes the “work of the Holy Spirit, therefore, is a very special kind of cognitive instrument or agency; it is

⁵⁷ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 205.

⁵⁸ Martin is a well-known atheist who has attacked Plantinga’s epistemological model on various occasions. His most famous work is probably *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

⁵⁹ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 205.

⁶⁰ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 271. Here, Plantinga sounds very much like the man most associated with presuppositional apologetics, Cornelius Van Til. See, for example, Van Til’s *The Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P and R Publishing, 1967). Van Til taught that humans who rejected the Christian God could have no true knowledge not just of religion, but of *any* subject. Plantinga admits such a position “seems a shade harsh, particularly because many who don’t believe in God seem to know a great deal more about some topics than most believers do” (271). Plantinga certainly does not go to such lengths, but anyone who has read Van Til will surely see echoes of his thinking throughout the pages of *Warranted Christian Belief*. This is to be expected, considering that Plantinga is coming from the same Reformed epistemological mode as did Van Til, and both rely heavily on Calvin and Kuyper.

a belief-producing process, all right, but one that is very much out of the ordinary. It is not part of our original noetic equipment. . . but instead part of a special divine response to our (unnaturally) sinful condition.”⁶¹ Thus, while we all have the *sensus divinitatis* within us, it is severely damaged, not working as designed; it is only Christians whose *sensus divinitatis* begins to work correctly once the Spirit begins to realign their corrupted, yet instinctive, awareness of God. The Holy Spirit “gets us to accept, cause us to believe [the] great truths of the gospel. These beliefs don’t just come by way of the normal operation of our natural faculties; they are a supernatural gift.”⁶² The three underlying forces of the extended A/C model, the Spirit, the Bible, and faith, Plantinga claims, are well summarized in this passage from Aquinas. “The believer has sufficient motive for believing, for he is moved by the authority of divine teaching confirmed by miracles and, what is more, by the inward instigation of the divine invitation.”⁶³

⁶¹ Ibid., 180.

⁶² Ibid., 245. Plantinga realizes that he is here verging on what some would consider a “fundamentalist” version of Christianity, but he firmly rejects such a label. Such a charge, with the associated implications of intellectual inferiority, are of course commonplace in the academic world. But Plantinga, with his typical aplomb, asks, so what? The charge of fundamentalism “means only that these views are rather more conservative than those of the objector, together with a certain distaste for the views or those who hold them. But how is *that* an objection to anything, and why should it warrant the contempt and contumely that goes with the term? An *argument* of some kind against those conservative views would be of interest, but merely pointing out that they differ from the objector’s. . . is not” (245). As with the work on the problem of evil, Plantinga here is attempting to show that there is nothing logically wrong with holding to a conservative view of Christianity. However, some critics would say that modern biblical criticism has made the fundamentalist approach to Christianity less than tenable, and I will look at Plantinga’s approach to modern biblical criticism in my final chapter.

⁶³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II, q.2, a.9, quoted in *Warranted Christian Belief*, 249. Again, in un-Plantinga-like fashion, we see Aquinas invoking the argument from miracles, which would mean he is using at least a semi-evidentialist

Plantinga says of this passage that “[h]ere we have (embryonically, at any rate) the same trio of processes: there is *belief*, there is *divine teaching* (as given in Scripture) which is the object of that belief, and there is also special divine activity in the production of the belief (the ‘inward investigation of the divine invitation’).”⁶⁴

Commenting on the central role of the Holy Spirit in Plantinga’s model, Andrew Dole writes it “certainly seems to me that the mere fact that the belief is implanted in a person directly by God gives this belief good credentials. In fact, it seems to me that credentials of a belief produced in this way. . . will be more impressive than those of beliefs produced by our own cognitive faculties.”⁶⁵ Of course, this type of argument presupposes that God does indeed exist, and that the Holy Spirit is able to provide us with such cognitive beliefs. Still, Dole’s point seems to be that the Spirit’s belief-producing power is far greater than our own. “If beliefs produced by our cognitive faculties deserve to be called knowledge when they display satisfactory epistemic credentials, then the beliefs produced directly by God, it seems to me, have even more right to the title.”⁶⁶

William Abraham has taken a similar position with respect to the validity of personal experience that the believer claims is initiated by the Holy Spirit. He says that Paul’s words concerning the Spirit in Romans 8:15 have traditionally been taken, in various branches of Christianity, “as the charter for a doctrine of Christian assurance.

approach. Oddly enough, Plantinga ignores the comment about miracles, even though he is using this passage to justify his own extended A/C model!

⁶⁴ Ibid., 249.

⁶⁵ Andrew Dole, “Cognitive Faculties, Cognitive Processes, and the Holy Spirit in Plantinga’s *Warrant Series*,” *Faith and Philosophy* 19 (2002): 43.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 43.

The claim it embodies refers to an experience of the Holy Spirit in which the believer experiences the testimony or witness of the Holy Spirit that he or she is a child of God. It is as if God the Holy Spirit speaks directly and inwardly to the individual in their hearts, or in their spirits, and thereby gives testimony to their forgiveness and acceptance before God.”⁶⁷ Again, such experiences of the divine assume that there actually is a God who can supply them, but, as Abraham points out, such experience of the Holy Spirit is hardly limited to “special” cases like St. Paul’s. “There is a host of testimony to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christian believers scattered across time and space, and they cannot be dismissed [in summary fashion].”⁶⁸

And while Abraham is aware that the alleged presence of the Spirit in the Christian’s life can lead to various interpretations (for instance, a Spirit-filled Reformed Christian may take the Spirit as teaching scripture is the sole source of authority for the believer, while a Roman Catholic Christian may think the Spirit is confirming the traditional Catholic insistence on scripture as well as Church tradition),⁶⁹ Abraham is

⁶⁷ William Abraham, “The Epistemological Significance of the Inner Witness of the Holy Spirit,” *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990): 437.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 438. Abraham notes further that those “who experience the inner witness of the Holy Spirit are naturally inclined to treat the experience as veridical. Descriptions of their experience which construe it as an encounter with the Holy Spirit appear luminously correct to those who speak of this kind of religious experience. Thus it leads to a deep sense of certainty about the reality of God and profoundly personal love for human agents” (441).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 442. The confusion that results from this aspect of Plantinga’s model will be detailed in depth in chapter 5 of this dissertation, and a proposal for a corrective will be examined in chapter 6. Abraham’s solution to the problem is to point out that experience of the Holy Spirit is never taken to be definitive in isolation, but must always be seen as part of the larger Christian tradition. The “work of the Holy Spirit is intimately related to a wider tradition which embodies at certain points appeal to special revelation” (445).

more concerned to establish the veridicality of the experience, not its precise meaning for various Christian denominations:

We might take discourse about the inner witness of the Holy Spirit as meaning or implying that it is legitimate to take the sentence, “I am forgiven of my sins” as properly basic, that is, we can believe this proposition and be rational in our believing it, even though we do not have any reasons for that belief. Such a belief might, of course, be triggered by certain circumstances. Thus such a belief might be formed on the occasion of hearing the gospel, or upon reading a commentary of scripture, or upon confession and repentance. However, the belief itself would be self-evident to us; it would not need, rationally speaking, to be supported in any way by other beliefs, although it might still be confirmed by other beliefs.⁷⁰

Abraham, like Plantinga, wants to insist that the long history of religious experience cannot be dismissed on the basis of foundationalist notions that all beliefs require empirical evidence. Just because there may be no such evidence available to the Spirit-inspired person hardly proves that what he or she has experienced is not real. And, in the absence of any “alternative naturalistic” explanations, Abraham thinks, the believer who has experienced the Holy Spirit “is entitled to accept an explanation which possesses adequate explanatory power. In my judgment he is perfectly correct to rest content for the present with the explanation he has to hand.”⁷¹

Plantinga realizes that there are other ways in which one could come to Christian faith. For instance, a strong Christian upbringing could produce one’s faith; a thorough knowledge of the reliable historical and archaeological underpinnings of the Bible could

⁷⁰ Ibid., 446. While sympathetic to Plantinga’s model of the Internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, he still thinks Plantinga would benefit from a healthy dose of evidentialism (see pages 446-447). I will return to his ideas on this issue in the last two chapters of this dissertation.

⁷¹ Ibid., 448.

do it, as well.⁷² But this would not be faith as knowledge, and this is precisely what Plantinga's A/C model attempts to do—provide support for the idea that Christian faith is indeed true knowledge. Plantinga is aiming for the same type of understating of faith-as-knowledge that Calvin advanced in his writings. Calvin taught that our faith is certain because scripture is infallible, and because the Spirit opens its truths to our hearts. Yet Plantinga goes beyond Calvin. He writes, “what is required for *knowledge* is that a belief be produced by cognitive faculties or processes that are working properly, in an appropriate epistemic environment. . . according to a design plan that is aimed at truth, and is furthermore *successfully* aimed at truth.”⁷³ The following four conditions are needed for faith to be equivalent with true knowledge:

When these beliefs are accepted by faith and result from the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit, they are produced by cognitive processes working properly; they are not produced by way of some cognitive malfunction. Faith, the whole process that produces them, is specifically designed by God himself to produce this very effect—just as vision, say, is designed by God to produce a certain kind of perceptual beliefs [sic]. When it does produce this effect, therefore, it is working properly; thus the beliefs in question satisfy the external rationality condition, which is also the first condition of warrant. Second, according to the model, the maxi-environment in which we find ourselves, including the cognitive contamination produced by sin, is precisely the cognitive environment for which this process is designed. The typical mini-environment is also favorable. Third, the process is designed to produce *true* beliefs; and fourth, the belief it produces—belief in the great things of the gospel⁷⁴—are in fact true; faith is a

⁷² Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 250.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁷⁴ The phrase, “great things of the gospel,” a favorite of Plantinga's, is from Jonathan Edwards. Plantinga cites approvingly his *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, ed. John Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959). Plantinga sees Edwards in the same vein as Calvin in his understanding of the believer experiencing God directly, without the need for arguments or apologetics. Thus Edwards: “[t]his evidence, that they, that are spiritually enlightened, have of the truth the things of religion, is a kind of intuitive and immediate evidence. They believe the doctrine's of God's word to be divine, because they see divinity in them” (*Religious Affection*), 298.

reliable belief-producing process, so that the process in question is *successfully* aimed at the production of true beliefs.⁷⁵

Some interesting things follow from this. Plantinga, for one thing, is attempting to construct a metaphysical edifice that is immune from the ravages of criticism, or so it seems to me. He never says this, but consider the following:

My Christian faith can have warrant, and warrant sufficient for knowledge, even if I don't know of and cannot make a good historical case for the reliability of the biblical writers or for what they teach. I don't *need* a good historical case for the truth of the central teachings of the gospel to be warranted in accepting them. I needn't be able to find a good argument, historical or otherwise, for the resurrection of Jesus Christ, or for his being the divine Son of God, or for the Christian claim that his suffering and death constitute an atoning sacrifice whereby we can be restored to the right relationship with God. On the model, the warrant for Christian belief doesn't require that I or anyone else have this kind of historical information; the warrant floats free of such questions. It doesn't require to be validated or proved by some source of belief *other* than faith, such as historical investigation.⁷⁶

But Plantinga takes all of this to surprising lengths. Realizing that his A/C model may sound like old-fashioned fundamentalism, he replies in the following way. He says his critics might be tempted to compare his A/C model to a "leap in the dark." But, he insists, his model for faith is nothing like such a blind leap. A leap in the dark, he maintains, is uncertain, because the jumper does not know the outcome of his jump (he uses the example of a mountain climber leaping across a crevasse, not knowing if he will make the jump or not). "In the case of faith, however, things are wholly different. You might as well claim that a memory belief, or the belief that $3 + 1 = 4$ is a leap in the dark. What makes something a leap in the dark is that the leaper doesn't know and has no firm

⁷⁵ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 257.

⁷⁶ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 259. The problems that I think are inherent with Plantinga's disregard for the historical aspects of the Christian religion will be made apparent later in this dissertation.

beliefs about what is out there in the dark.”⁷⁷ This passage is stunning at first; is Plantinga equating the religious faith of the A/C model with the certainty that obtains in a mathematical equation? It seems he is, as he continues with his leap of faith analogy:

The case of faith, this sure and certain knowledge, is very different. For the person with faith. . . the great things of the gospel seem clearly true, obvious, compelling. She finds herself convinced—just as she does in the case of clear memory beliefs or her belief in elementary truths of arithmetic. Phenomenologically, therefore, from the inside, there is no similarity at all to a leap in the dark. Nor, of course, is there (on the model) any similarity outside. This is no leap in the dark, not merely because the person with faith is wholly convinced but also because, as a matter of fact, the belief in question meets the conditions for rationality and warrant.⁷⁸

Plantinga stresses the certitude inherent in his A/C model because he cannot stomach the idea of probability, the idea that Christianity has a “good chance,” based on historical evidence or moral and theological arguments, of being true. This, of course, has always been the approach of Christian evidentialists, from William Paley down to contemporary defenders of the literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus like William Lane Craig and N.T. Wright.⁷⁹ But Plantinga replies as follows. Even if a person comes to believe, through historical investigation, or traditional evidential apologetics, that Christ really did rise from the dead, such mere intellectual knowledge will not suffice to

⁷⁷ Ibid., 263.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 264.

⁷⁹ For instance, see Craig’s *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), and Wright’s magisterial *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003).

produce a living, vibrant faith. Real Christian truth “must be sealed to the heart, as well as revealed to the mind.”⁸⁰

As for the probability aspect of the traditional evidentialist apologetic, Plantinga is dismissive of any arguments that may be advanced. Referring to one of Richard Swinburne’s apologetic works, Plantinga writes “[i]n his book *The Existence of God*,⁸¹ Swinburne considers this probability [i.e., that of Christianity being true] and concludes on the last page of the book, ‘on our total evidence theism is more probable than not.’”⁸² Plantinga says this type of probabilistic argument simply is not enough to give certainty to the believer; it falls far short of the certitude that Calvin and Edwards claimed is available to the Christian believer, and that Plantinga claims is available via the extended A/C model he has offered. Thus he rejects the type of argument Swinburne advances, saying, “if what I know is only that the probability of Christian belief [is somewhat likely] I can’t sensibly believe it. I can *hope* that it is true, and think it rather likely that it is; I can’t believe it.”⁸³ Plantinga ends the section on the extended A/C model stating that “[i]f

⁸⁰ Ibid., 269. Plantinga seems to overlook the fact that God can use such intellectual assent to the truth of Christ’s resurrection as an occasion for spiritual conversion. This is precisely what happened to the former atheist C.S. Lewis, whose intellectual acceptance of the truth of the resurrection led to his spiritual conversion. John Warwick Montgomery had a similar experience, as did popular apologist Josh McDowell.

⁸¹ Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979). For another work in which Swinburne stresses Christian theism’s probability, rather than certainty, see his *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁸² Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 273-74. Again, Plantinga’s critique here seems odd, when he himself admitted earlier that he himself could produce no compelling argument for the truth of Christianity that would convince an outsider.

⁸³ Ibid., 274.

(as I claim) the fact is there are no good philosophical objections to the model, given the *truth* of Christian belief, then any successful objection to the model will also have to be a successful objection to the truth of Christian belief.”⁸⁴ Plantinga, usually a very perspicacious writer, often pens confusing sentences when he is addressing this topic. What he means is that if there are no logical objections to how his model for warrant works (and if there are or not is debatable), then the critic can only level his charges at the truth of Christian faith itself, not the way that Christians perceive that truth. Plantinga, it seems to me, has done something very odd here. He has set up a demarcation between the believer and the object of his or her belief. He writes as if the way a Christian believes is just as important as if that belief has any factual basis. This, of course, is inspired by his Reformed background, which assumes God as a given, then proceeds to analyze faith in that God. But what if the Christian God does not exist, and the doctrines of the Christian faith are not true? Plantinga refers to such threats as “defeaters,” as explained earlier in this dissertation. Two of the most serious objections as I see it are, the challenges posed by critical biblical scholarship, and the challenges posed by various other world religions. In the remainder of this chapter, I will explore how Plantinga explores these topics, and in chapter 5 I will show how various critics have taken up these charges, and in chapter 6 I will offer some insights of my own into them.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 285.

Other Faiths

The first objection that probably comes to the thoughtful reader of Plantinga is, why cannot his A/C model be used to support the validity of any other religion? In other words, why could not a Hindu have a “Krishna Model,” a Muslim has a “Muhammad Model,” and so forth? One example that occurs repeatedly in Plantinga’s writings, and in those of his critics, is the so-called “Great Pumpkin Objection.” In the comic strip *Peanuts*, the naïve Linus waits all night in a pumpkin patch for the arrival of the Great Pumpkin. Of course, the Great One never comes, and Linus’ belief in him is shown to be without warrant! But, critics allege, this is a paradigmatic example of how Plantinga’s model could be used to say *any* religion, even silly cartoon ones, is true for its adherents. Even voodoo beliefs could also come under the heading of warranted belief. Plantinga answers that just because Christian belief is taken as properly basic in his system, it does not follow that just any belief can be taken that way. Even “Descartes and Locke thought *some* beliefs were properly basic with respect to warrant; should we object that they were therefore committed to thinking *any* belief is properly basic?”⁸⁵

Plantinga has a point here. There is a difference between saying that Christian beliefs, that have shaped the Western world for 2,000 years, that have changed millions of lives, and so forth, are in the same epistemological league as the obviously false Great Pumpkin, or the quite dubious practices of Satanism or voodoo. Although, in the case of voodoo, it cannot so easily be dismissed, since voodoo is a real religion practiced with great sincerity by many people in Haiti and elsewhere. Still, Plantinga is not impressed. Even if the voodoo epistemologist reaches his beliefs the same way that the A/C model

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 344.

Christian does, it does not follow that both Christianity and voodoo are true, because he thinks it is the case that “the central claims of the Christian faith are true and voodoo belief is false. It is therefore not the case that if the claim that belief in God and in the great things of the gospel is properly basic with respect to warrant is itself warranted, then by the same token the claim that voodoo belief is properly basic with respect to warrant is itself warranted.”⁸⁶

The case of the Great Pumpkin, and perhaps even voodoo, may seem a bit strained. After all, few educated people are voodoo adherents, and only the fictional Linus believes in the Pumpkin. But what about other world religions, especially theistic ones? Such religions have millions of followers, many of them sophisticated and well-educated. Can Plantinga dismiss these as easily as he does Great Pumpkinism and voodoo? At one point, Plantinga reluctantly admits that the types of claims he is making for orthodox Christianity could likely be made for other theistic traditions: “probably something like that *is* true for the other theistic religions: Judaism, Islam, some forms of Hinduism, some forms of Buddhism, some forms of American Indian religion.”⁸⁷ Yet, as far as I know, Plantinga never seriously addresses the possibility that these religions are rivals for Christianity in terms of warrant and proper basicity. Even in an essay entitled “A Defense of Religious Exclusivism,” he never really delves into the issue of how one is to adjudicate between Christianity and other theistic faiths.⁸⁸ But to be fair to Plantinga,

⁸⁶ Ibid., 349. Plantinga’s failure to establish genuine criteria for determine the truth of Christianity *vis a vis* other faiths will be explored later in this dissertation.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 350.

⁸⁸ This problem, inherent in so much of Plantinga’s writings, will be fully addressed in the remaining chapters.

his primary purpose here is refute the charge, leveled by some like John Hick, that Christian exclusivism is arrogant or offensive.⁸⁹ But Plantinga, like Hick, fails to offer any reasons why Christianity should be considered true, while other world faiths should not.⁹⁰ Plantinga does admit, however, that the challenge of other religions does raise a problem for Christians, but he does not offer ways to resolve this problem. Thus Plantinga states from “a Christian perspective, the situation of religious pluralism and our awareness of it is itself a manifestation of our miserable human condition; and it may deprive us of some of the comfort and peace the Lord has promised his followers.”⁹¹

Plantinga and Modern Bible Scholarship

As an analytic philosopher, Plantinga is not a specialist in the field of biblical studies, and he does not claim to be. In an essay entitled “Two (or More) Kinds of

⁸⁹ Alvin Plantinga, “A Defense of Religious Exclusivism,” in *The Analytic Theist*, 187-209. The charge of arrogance, of course, is easy enough to refute. All the great world religions teach radically different things about the nature of God, the destiny of humanity, the remedy of sin, etc. Religious pluralism is popular for what might be termed politically correct reasons, but Plantinga’s essay easily refutes the charge that exclusivism is somehow arrogant or disrespectful. The law of non-contradiction (A cannot be A and not-A at the same time), is the simple, common sense remedy to pluralism. Thus, Jesus cannot be God (as in Christianity) and merely a prophet (Islam) at the same time. Similarly, God cannot be a trinity (Christianity) or pure oneness (Judaism) simultaneously. Plantinga addresses this issue only briefly in his *Warranted Christian Belief* (441-442), but again, he does not address the validity of competing truth-claims, but only makes the case that a Christian may still be justified in his or her own beliefs, even if there are other religious beliefs that contradict it.

⁹⁰ See my “Is John Hick’s Concept of the ‘Real’ and Adequate Criterion for Evaluating Religious Truth-Claims?” *Themelios* 27 (2002): 45-57. Plantinga falls prey to similar problems, as the later chapters of this dissertation will reveal.

⁹¹ Plantinga, “A Defense of Religious Exclusivism,” 208.

Scripture Scholarship,”⁹² he evinces a good understanding of the basic history of biblical criticism, especially in terms of the anti-supernatural bias⁹³ that has come to characterize much of the discipline, as well as the various, and often contradictory approaches to the discipline that often seem to cancel one another out. As with his extended A/C model, Plantinga rebels against the idea that the only basis we have for knowledge of Christianity are the alleged “assured results” of modern biblical criticism. Biblical criticism, like natural theology and evidentialist apologetics, takes insufficient account of the influence of the Holy Spirit. To wit, “there is available a source of warranted true belief, a way of coming to see the truth of these [i.e., biblical] teachings, that is quite independent of historical study,” by which he means the guiding of the Holy Spirit. Thus an uneducated Christian can still read the Bible and be convicted of its truths, even if he or she knows little or nothing about “professional” bible scholarship.⁹⁴ Few, if any, Christians would dispute this. But Plantinga says of any conflict that arises between what he abbreviates as HBC (historical biblical criticism) and the Spirit-taught beliefs of the Christian about the Bible: “That conflict does not offer a defeater for his acceptance of the great things of the gospel—nor, to the degree that those alleged results rest on epistemological assumptions he doesn’t share, of anything else he accepts on the basis of

⁹² Alvin Plantinga, “Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship,” *Modern Theology* 14 (1998): 243-278. A chapter bearing the same name also appears in *Warranted Christian Belief*, 374-421.

⁹³ For a good example of the supernatural as problematic for biblical studies, see William Lane Craig, et al, *Jesus’ Resurrection: Fact or Figment?* (InterVarsity Press, 2000).

⁹⁴ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 274.

biblical teaching.”⁹⁵ For one thing, modern biblical scholarship in many instances is premised upon the rejection of the supernatural element in scripture. Under the influence of modernity, many Bible scholars since the 1800’s have sought alternative ways to explain the miraculous portions of scripture that “modern” people allegedly can no longer believe in. Therefore, Plantinga says the traditional Christian, lead by the Spirit, and operating from an A/C model of belief, should be skeptical about skeptical biblical criticism! For “it refuses to admit a source of warranted belief (faith and divine revelation, both of which the traditional Christian takes to be sources of warrant) the traditional Christian accepts, and it is precluded in advance from coming to such conclusions as that Jesus really did arise from the dead and really is the divine son of God.”⁹⁶

Because modern scholarship possesses this bias, and because so much of it contradicts itself, Plantinga can state that “the traditional Christian. . . has good reason to reject the skeptical claims of HBC and continue to hold traditional Christian belief despite the allegedly corrosive acids of HBC.”⁹⁷ Plantinga is correct in one sense; what used to be called higher criticism of the Bible certainly is often guilty of adopting an anti-supernatural bias. If it is impossible for God to intervene in the world and perform

⁹⁵ Ibid., 375.

⁹⁶ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 414. A modern representative of the doubt regarding the historical resurrection is German New Testament scholar Gerd Ludemann, who recently gave up his Christian faith because he could no longer accept the miraculous element in the Bible. See, for example, his *What Really Happened to Jesus: A Historical Approach to the Resurrection* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996).

⁹⁷ Ibid., 412.

miracles⁹⁸ and if dead mean stay dead (a la Hume), then it stands to reason that critics who have taken these positions as irrefutable truth will necessarily come to conclusions about the Bible that are at odds with what Christian orthodoxy has always maintained. And that critics often disagree with each other to the point of near absurdity can be seen from looking at the current controversy in Jesus studies. Additionally, the modern skeptical critic dismisses the conviction of the Holy Spirit, and the God-authorized teaching authority of the church, as legitimate sources for the perseverance of the God-given truth of the Bible. “Traditional Christians, rightly or wrongly, think they do have sources of warranted belief in addition to [skeptical critical] reason; divine testimony in Scripture and also faith and the work of the Holy Spirit, or testimony of the Spirit-led church. They may be *mistaken* about that; but until someone gives a decent argument for the conclusion that they *are* mistaken, they need not be impressed by the result of scholarship that ignores this further source of belief.”⁹⁹ So, I think Plantinga is on firm ground indeed when he questions just how much Christians have to fear from the ravages of modern biblical criticism. The critics have not refuted the great things of the gospel (e.g., that the God of the Bible created the world, that this God exists in Trinitarian form, or that Jesus rose from the dead). After all, how could any prove that such things did not occur? With admirable candor, Plantinga admits that if HBC could produce documents that proved that the apostles fabricated the faith, Christianity would be in serious

⁹⁸ For an excellent treatment of the possibility of miracles, see R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas, eds. *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Actions in History* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 416.

trouble.¹⁰⁰ But no such documents have been found, so Plantinga thinks that warranted, properly basic faith is virtually immune from skeptical Bible criticisms. He says:

However, nothing at all like this [i.e., the discovery of documents that would prove Christianity is a forgery] has emerged from HBC, whether Troeltschian or non-Troeltschian; indeed, there is little of any kind that can be considered “assured results,” if only because of the wide-ranging disagreement among those who practice HBC. We don’t have anything like assured results (or even reasonably well-attested results) that conflict with traditional Christian belief in such a way that belief of that sort can continue to be accepted only at considerable cost; nothing at all like this has happened.¹⁰¹

But if Plantinga can at times sound almost like a “fundamentalist” in *Warranted Christian Belief*, one of his more recent writings proves this is not the case. When Plantinga teaches that his extended A/C model can make available to the believer the great things of the gospel, he means the gospel’s major themes, as opposed to the idea that the Holy Spirit is convicting the believer of the literal truth of every word of the Bible (inerrancy). Responding to a critique from Richard Fumerton that many descriptions of God in the Old Testament (e.g., those that portray him as wrathful or capricious) present him as behaving “in ways incompatible with the other hypothesis the Christian accepts,”¹⁰² Plantinga says that each “troublesome” case Fumerton raises must be examined individually. He writes, “as for the flood, most Christians, I think, would view that story as they would the story of Job; not intended to teach us sober history; God

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 420-21.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 421.

¹⁰² Richard A Fumerton, “Plantinga, Warrant, and Christian Belief,” *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (2001): 350.

does not overreact, and does not repent what he has done.”¹⁰³ Aside from the debatable point as to whether or not God can change his mind,¹⁰⁴ Plantinga here is more amenable to a somewhat more “liberal” view of scripture than suggested by 2000’s *Warranted Christian Belief*. Thus he writes, “what the Holy Spirit produces is faith; and the content of faith is the great things of the Gospel, the main lines of the Christian story, the intersection of the great Christian creeds. However, it isn’t the case, in the model, that the Holy Spirit in any special way produces belief in the rest of what is taught in the Bible—for example the incidents Fumerton mentions.”¹⁰⁵ Plantinga is here willing to concede that certain OT passages are objectionable to, and perhaps irreconcilably with, modern Christian sensibilities. Thus, Plantinga thinks he solves the “defeater” that Fumerton has raised against Christian belief, that is, that God is portrayed sometimes in an immoral manner in the Bible. Plantinga writes, “a Christian will read the Old Testament in the light of the New; if God’s promulgating the Christian law of love seems incompatible with his ordering the destruction of the Canaanites, the latter won’t be taken at face value.”¹⁰⁶ Fumerton’s alleged defeater, in Plantinga’s eyes, may raise concerns for the Christian, but it does not in any way shake his or her faith: “perhaps I do have defeaters for such propositions as that God killed 70,000 men because of a mistake [i.e.,

¹⁰³ Alvin Plantinga, “Internalism, Externalism, Defeaters and Arguments for Christian Belief,” 388.

¹⁰⁴ Whether or not God changes his mind has been part of the focus of the “open theism” debate that has raged in evangelical circles for the past decade. See, for example, Richard Rice et al, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 388-89.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 389.

David's] in conducting a census. I don't think God would do such a thing, and do not know what to make of that passage. But of course that doesn't give me a defeater for Christian belief, let alone belief in God."¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

For the past two hundred years, biblical criticism has raised issues that do pose serious threats for the believer. To cite just one example, the traditional belief that the gospels were written by eyewitness disciples is now rejected by probably a majority of NT scholars. Plantinga's almost flippant rejection of this kind of criticism (which, incidentally, has only partly to do with anti-supernatural bias and much to do with textual and historical considerations) is problematic, and I will go into greater detail in the final chapter of this dissertation.

Perhaps the best way to end this chapter is with the words of Deane-Peter Baker, one of our most astute Plantinga interpreters. He writes,

It seems to me that, as far as it goes, Plantinga's model achieves what he intends it to show. . . something that neither Wolterstorff's nor Alston's theories manage to accomplish. I take as evidence of Plantinga's success in this respect the fact that there are very few responses to Plantinga's model that take on his model directly. The vast majority of the responses. . . fall into what one could call the "yes, but. . ." category—that is, most take it as given that there is no internal inconsistency in Plantinga's model, but contend that this is still not a sufficient answer to the question [of whether or not Christianity is true].¹⁰⁸

The "yes, but. . ." category of objections will be the subject of my next chapter.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 389. This approach raises as many problems for Plantinga as it solves, as I will sure in the final chapter of this dissertation.

¹⁰⁸ Deane-Peter Baker, *Tayloring Reformed Epistemology*, 95.

CHAPTER FIVE

Problems with Plantinga's Notion of Warranted Christian Faith

Introduction

For the past several years the responses to Plantinga's brand of epistemology, or Reformed epistemology, have been legion. Some responses have been very critical¹ while others have been generally supportive.² However, the majority of responses that I have read seem (especially those penned by Christian authors) to see both positive and negative aspects in Plantinga's work.³ That is, they believe his epistemological outlook has much to recommend it, but at the same time they think it is beset with serious, if not insurmountable problems. In this chapter, I wish to concentrate on some problematic prolegomena inherent in Plantinga's thought, and then move into the major areas of his writings that I find to be the weakest. Specifically, I will examine the following areas: the inability of Plantinga's model to adjudicate between competing religious truth-claims; the weakness of his so-called parity argument; and the troubling roles played by sin, and by the *sensus divinitatis*, in his epistemology.

¹ See, for example, *Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology*, ed. Linda Zagzebski (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1994). Also John R. T. Lamont, "Plantinga on Belief," *The Thomist* 65 (2001): 593-611.

² For example, K. Scott Oliphint, "Epistemology and Christian Belief," *Westminster Theological Journal* 63 (2001): 151-82.

³ As in Keith Mascord's treatment of Plantinga's thought, *Alvin Plantinga and Christian Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007).

The Oddness of Plantinga's A/C Model, and His Reluctance to Engage in Positive Apologetics

When reading Plantinga, one cannot help but notice some of the odd statements he makes concerning his model for warranted Christian belief. Instead of arguing that there is evidence for God, and therefore that Christian beliefs are true, Plantinga often says precisely the opposite. He states that *if* the Christian God exists, *then* Christian beliefs are probably warranted. That is, if such a God exists, it is only logical that He would design us with the proper noetic structure in order, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to perceive Him.⁴ James Beilby writes of Plantinga on this point, “[s]o what circumstances are such that there be a defeater for Christian belief? There would [only] be defeaters for Christian belief if Christianity was, in fact, not true.”⁵ But what exactly does Plantinga prove with such an argument? If he assumes that the debated issue (the existence of the Christian God) is settled in the affirmative, then to claim that Christian belief is probably true seems almost a tautology. “Plantinga seems to be caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, if Plantinga’s theism requires that God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent, then his claim that ‘if theistic belief is true then it is probably warranted’ teeters precariously close to the edge of tautology.”⁶

⁴ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 188-89.

⁵ James Beilby, “Plantinga’s Model of Warranted Christian Belief,” in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. James E. Tomberlin and Peter Van Inwagen (Hingham, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1985), 138.

⁶ R. Douglas Geivett and Greg Jesson, “Plantinga’s Externalism and the Terminus of Warrant-Based Epistemology,” *Philosophia Christi* 3 (2001): 333.

This odd epistemological position probably results because Plantinga thinks there are several critics who think Christianity may be true, but that Christian faith still is not rational. These are the *de jure* objectors, Plantinga claims. He cites as examples of this kind of critic Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, stating that “Freud thinks, once we see that theistic and religious belief has its origin in wishful thinking, we will also see that it is very probably false.”⁷ And while it is true that both Freud and Marx had theories as to why religious beliefs developed within the human psyche, I would argue that they came up with their theories because they did not believe in revealed religion in the first place. Thus, they were really *de facto*, not *de jure*, objectors to Christianity. As far as I know, Plantinga never really comes up with an example of a thinker who objects to Christianity on purely *de jure* grounds.⁸

Linda Zagzebski is gentler in her evaluation of this part of Plantinga’s thought, though she says: “I agree that Plantinga has successfully responded to the particular people he has in mind—those who, with a sneer, accuse traditional Christians of being beyond the pale of rationality while admitting that the truth status of Christian beliefs is an open question.”⁹ Still, she knows there is something problematic in this approach of Plantinga’s:

⁷ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 162.

⁸ To be fair to Plantinga here, he does recognize, and admit, in various places in *Warranted Christian Belief*, that the *de jure* and *de facto* objections to Christian truth do not occur in isolation from one another, but tend to overlap. Still, he does not go far enough in realizing that the question, Is Christianity objectively true (the *de facto* question) is the one that drives all *de jure* ones.

⁹ Linda Zagzebski, “Plantinga’s Warranted Christian Belief and the Aquinas/Calvin Model,” *Philosophical Books* 43 (2002): 119.

not all challenges come from such people—certainly not the most important ones. The question at issue here is one concerning rationality. That is a philosophical question, and like all philosophical questions it arises within a tradition of philosophical reflection. Some of the challenges to the rationality of Christian belief arise out of a sincere and intelligent understanding of that tradition. Some even come from Christians themselves who want a deeper understanding of how Christian belief can meet the standards of rationality in that tradition.¹⁰

Plantinga seems to realize Zagzebski's point at times, and yet he does not allow it to damage his seemingly impenetrable epistemological fortress. "Sometimes Plantinga seems to allow the possibility that there are defeaters for Christian belief (even if it is true), but his assertion that horrendous evil and suffering *does not* constitute a defeater for the religious beliefs of the properly functioning Christian would seem to mitigate that possibility."¹¹ Beilby's point is a powerful one. If even the problem of evil, adjudged by skeptics as well as Christians to be the strongest argument against Christian faith, is not a defeater, what possibly *could* be? One is reminded of the parable told by Antony Flew in which two travelers come across a garden. One of them (representing the atheist) says no gardener tends the garden. The other (representing the believer) disagrees, insisting there

¹⁰ Ibid., 119. Zagzebski sees a further problem here for Plantinga. She writes, "Let me now return to Plantinga's argument that Christian belief is rational if it is true and his implied position that it is not rational if false. First, I want to say that I think the argument is rhetorically unwise. The move was intended to show that since Christian belief is rational and true, then those who want to attack it rationally must attack its truth, a much harder task. But by the same token and for exactly the same reason, if the rationality of Christian belief is tied to its truth, Plantinga has given us the job of defending its rationality by defending its truth—a much harder task. He has made the task of defending the rationality of Christian belief much harder than most of us thought it was. And so, it seems, we need natural theology after all. And we need more than natural theology because demonstrating the truth of the model would require demonstrating the truth of distinctively Christian doctrines such as the trinity and the incarnation, as well as the epistemic claims about the operation of the Holy Spirit in bringing Christians to believe in a way that is basic and self-authenticating. I would much rather try to demonstrate the rationality of a model than its truth" (121).

¹¹ James Beilby, *Epistemology as Theology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 189.

indeed is a Gardner. After performing a series of tests, no Gardner is detected. Finally, the believer is forced to admit the Gardner is “invisible, intangible. . . has no scent and makes no sound, a Gardner who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves.” The skeptic then replies, “how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive Gardner differ from an imaginary Gardner or even no Gardner at all?”¹²

Of course, such a question would probably not produce an answer from Plantinga, for the skeptic in this parable is demanding that his interlocutor produce *positive* apologetic arguments for the Gardner’s existence. Plantinga’s reasons for not delving deeply into positive apologetics and its ramification for his A/C model are twofold. First, there is his distrust of such arguments, based on his Calvinist/Reformed heritage. But second, and just as important, is what I take to be a failure on his part to fairly judge what is involved in the positive apologetics endeavor. He writes, “I don’t know of an argument for Christian belief that seems very likely to convince one who doesn’t already accept its conclusion.”¹³ Whether or not this is true will be examined in Chapter 6 of this dissertation, but this statement is symptomatic of the fact that Plantinga seems to expect far too much from natural theology, and from apologetic arguments in general. “What is striking about his definition of natural theology is how high he sets the bar; the ‘success conditions’ for natural theology, as envisioned by Plantinga, are enormously stringent. According to Plantinga, a successful piece of natural theology must start with self-evident premises, utilize a self-evidently valid argument form, and produce conclusions with

¹² Antony Flew, “Theology and Falsification,” in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (NY: Macmillan, 1955), 189.

¹³ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 200-201.

maximal epistemic status.”¹⁴ In fact, even the resurrection of Jesus, considered to be a powerful evidential tool from St. Paul all the way up to such evangelical luminaries as William Lane Craig and N .T. Wright, gets short shrift from Plantinga. Kelly James Clark, himself sympathetic to the goals of Reformed epistemology, notes Plantinga “argues that, on the available historical evidence, the probability that the full panoply of Christian beliefs (including the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus) is true is quite low, too low to warrant Christian belief on the basis of that evidence.”¹⁵ In fact, even if the probability of the resurrection were quite high, Plantinga would still not be impressed by such evidence because he thinks such a probabilistic approach to Christianity “commits a category mistake: it assumes that Christian belief is a hypothesis that requires the evidential support of some body of data or some set of beliefs.”¹⁶ Plantinga says that for the Christian believer, probability does not enter into her understanding. Plantinga writes that, “if it is the set of beliefs *actually accepted* by the believer, then, of course, the probability of her beliefs will be one.”¹⁷

How Can Plantinga Adjudicate Between Rival Religious Truth-Claims?

Many defenders of Plantinga have castigated those who claim Plantinga has not done enough to include positive apologetics in his writings, and that he has only focused on negative apologetics, that is, defending the believer’s right to believe in the absence of

¹⁴ James Beilby, “Plantinga’s Model of Warranted Christian Belief,” 141.

¹⁵ Kelly James Clark, “Pluralism and Proper Function,” in *Alvin Plantinga* ed. James E. Tomberlin and Peter Van Inwagen (Hingham, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1985) , 169.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹⁷ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 442.

traditional theological arguments. I think it is true that some critics have expected more of Plantinga's A/C model than he ever intended it to deliver. Still, I think many of these criticisms do have some merit, for two reasons. One, Plantinga himself says that *Warranted Christian Belief* is "an exercise in apologetics and philosophy of religion, an attempt to demonstrate the failure of a range of objections to Christian belief."¹⁸ If one is defending Christianity against objections, it is not realistic to limit that defense only to negative apologetics, for questions about positive apologetics will naturally arise. One cannot defend half of an argument and then arbitrarily bar all questions concerning the other half. In fact, Plantinga, for all his heralded mistrust of natural theology and traditional arguments for Christian theism, does not reject such approaches entirely, for while "he argues that faith should not be *based on* arguments, he acknowledges that faith can be *affected by* arguments. Atheological argument can negatively affect the epistemic status of Christian belief, and theistic arguments can increase the warrant of a Christian's beliefs."¹⁹ Two, Plantinga's A/C model is one the most important pieces of Christian epistemology of the 20th century, so it is only natural that questions about its truth and applicability be raised, whether those questions are concerned with apologetics in its negative, or in its positive, form. Such questions are a testament to the provocative power of his negative apologetic approach that leaves the reader eagerly awaiting more.

In his magnum opus, 2000's *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga, while answering the charge that his A/C model does not properly distinguish between the truth-claims of Christianity and those of other religions, says the following:

¹⁸ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, xiii.

¹⁹ Beilby, "Plantinga's Model of Warranted Christian Belief," 135-36.

Well, probably something like that [i.e., the warrant found provided by his A/C model] *is* true for other theistic religions: Judaism, Islam, some forms of Hinduism, some forms of Buddhism, some forms of American Indian religion. Perhaps these religions are like Christianity in that they are subject to non de jure objections that are independent of de facto objections. Still, that isn't true for just *any* set of beliefs. It isn't true, for example, for voodooism, or the belief that the earth is flat, or Humean skepticism, or philosophical naturalism.²⁰

To be fair to Plantinga, his main point here is to explain that not just *any* belief, however ludicrous it may be, can provide its adherent with true knowledge and reasons for warranted belief. This is obviously true, and few thinkers would say that any and all religions or world views have equal credibility. Flat earth advocates can be proven to be wrong, in a way that Christians or Muslims cannot. But Plantinga in this passage makes a stunning admission that numerous other theistic (or semi-theistic religions) may do essentially the same thing that Christianity does: supply a basis for warranted belief for their followers. Plantinga here, it seems to me, is suggesting that his entire epistemological argument in defense of Christianity may not be unique after all, but then proceeds to ignore the question for the remaining 150 pages of his book. If his book were intended to justify generic belief in some sort of universalist God, this would not be a problem, but the purpose of this book, indeed, of all of his later writings,²¹ is to show that *Christianity* is true. In an article published in 1995. Plantinga says much the same thing with regard to religious pluralism: “for all I know, their conflicting beliefs [i.e., beliefs of

²⁰ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 350.

²¹ His early work on the Free Will Defense (as exemplified in *God and other Minds*, and *The Nature of Necessity*) could be taken as arguing for a type of generic God, but as his career progressed, Plantinga clearly developed an epistemology that was specifically Christian. Thus the invocation of Aquinas and Calvin for his A/C model, which is the focal point of *Warranted Christian Belief* and which he clearly intends to be his definitive word on the subject of Christian epistemology, based on his scant output on the subject since the publication of that tome.

adherents who belong to competing faiths] have for them the same internally available epistemic markers, the same phenomenology, as mine have for me.”²²

It is precisely this point that John Hick, the standard-bearer of religious pluralism, has pointed out as a primary weakness in Plantinga’s A/C model. Hick charges that Plantinga is arbitrary in choosing Christianity over other world religions, since he does not offer positive apologetic reasons for embracing Christianity. But Plantinga replies that

the exclusivist is not in fact being merely arbitrary, because she doesn’t believe that views incompatible with hers *are* ‘as epistemologically well based’ [presumably these words are Hick’s, but Plantinga does not cite the source] as her Christian beliefs. He may agree that the views of others seem just as true to them as hers do to her; they have all the same internal markers as her own. She may agree further that these others are *justified*, flouting no epistemic duty in believing as they do. She may agree still further that she doesn’t know of any arguments that would convince them that they are wrong and she is right. Nevertheless she thinks her own position is not only true, and thus alethically [sic] superior to views incompatible with her, [sic] but superior from an epistemic point of view as well: how then does she fall into arbitrariness?²³

Plantinga’s point seems to be that his Christian believer is not displaying arbitrariness as far as her own convictions are concerned; she truly believes her Christian beliefs are true, and non-Christian ones are false. She is not, of course, being intentionally arbitrary, but I doubt this is what Hick means. Hick means that from the point of view of an *outsider*,

²² Alvin Plantinga, “A Defense of Religious Pluralism,” reprinted in 1998’s *The Analytic Theist* ed. James F. Sennett (Eerdmans, 1998), 199. In the same article, Plantinga goes on to state, with regard to those who hold different religious views, that “I doubt that I could find an argument to show them I am right and they are wrong” (199). On page 200, Plantinga states that his religious views, as well as those of anyone else, could be wrong, but “what else can you do? You don’t really have an alternative [to taking some kind of stance on the issue of religious matters]” (200). Again, an odd thing for Plantinga to say, since most of his work on this issue (especially in *Warranted Christian Belief*), has been aimed at providing an infallible basis for *Christian* belief!

²³ Plantinga, “Ad Hick,” *Faith and Philosophy* 14 (1997): 296.

her decision to accept Christianity over all other faiths is purely arbitrary, because she is not giving the outsider any reasons why Christianity is to be preferred over all other faiths.²⁴ For Plantinga to claim that she is not displaying arbitrariness is akin to someone claiming that Republicans are more honest than Democrats, or that Plato is more profound than Kant. Those who have no knowledge of either party, or who have not read either philosopher, will want to know *why* one is to be preferred over the other. Yet such criteria for adjudication are precisely what Plantinga does not give, and does not even seem to recognize the need for: the Christian “believes that those who disagree with him lack some epistemic benefit or grace he has; hence he isn't being merely arbitrary.”²⁵

²⁴ Ironically (and truthfully), Plantinga attacks Hick for the very same thing, that is, failing to offer reasons why Christianity is in no better epistemic position than other religions: “if Hick is to claim that Christian belief really *is* no better based, epistemically, than these other beliefs, he presumably owes us an argument for the conclusion that those claims of epistemic privilege are in fact false. . . . I don't see how he could offer such an argument, and I'll bet he doesn't either” (296). Plantinga is correct that Hick's nearly evangelical zeal in promoting pluralism does not depend on argumentation and evidence, but rather on Hick's soft-hearted (soft-headed?) belief that all religions are valid paths to the divine. For a critique of Hick's position, see my “Is John Hick's Concept of the Real an Adequate Criterion for Evaluating Religious Truth-Claims?” *Themelios* 27 (2002): 45-56. Hick's failure to even attempt to adjudicate between different religious truth-claims can be striking. For instance, regarding the contradiction between the New Testament and the Koran regarding the fate of Christ (with the Bible teaching Jesus was crucified, while the Koran says someone who “looked like” Jesus perished on the cross), Hick can only weakly suggest that “[a]ll one can say in general about such disagreements, whether between two traditions or between any one of them and the secular historians, is that they could only properly be settled by the weight of historical evidence. However, the events in question are usually so remote in time, and the evidence so slight and uncertain, that the question cannot be definitely settled.” Taken from his *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press), 1993, 146. But in the case of the crucifixion of Jesus, this simply is not so. I know of no historian, Christian or secular, who claims that the founder of Christianity did not die on a Roman cross (whether or not he was the Son of God, of course, is another matter entirely). The alternate version offered in the Koran is clearly non-historical, and accepted only by Muslims.

²⁵ Plantinga, “Ad Hick,” 298.

The ‘benefit’ or ‘grace’ Plantinga refers to is, of course, the Holy Spirit, as he reveals in large sections of his *Warranted Christian Belief*. Yet Plantinga really does not avoid the matter of conflicting religious truth-claims by invoking the Holy Spirit. For virtually any religion can claim this sort of divine guidance. Mormons (whom I suspect Plantinga would rightly view as not belonging to the stream of “classical Christianity” of which he views his own work a part), could claim the Holy Spirit has convinced them that the Book of Mormon is a revelation from God, on a par with the Bible (and this is precisely what Mormons claim). Muslims could invoke the spirit of Allah as their guide when claiming that the Koran is a superior revelation to the sacred, yet corrupted, text of the Bible.²⁶

Ironically, Plantinga’s refusal to offer any kind of criterion by which the truth or falsehood of Christianity and other religions may be judged leads to at least one conclusion he certainly did not intend, that of the apparent validity of religious pluralism! Deane-Peter Baker writes that “Plantinga’s approach might easily be co-opted by defenders of other religious traditions, leaving Plantinga forced to recognize a sort of epistemic pluralism which (it is implied) is something he would not wish to do. Thus Paul Helm writes that Plantinga’s argument ‘leaves his defense of the rationality of Christian theism not so much open to refutation as to imitation.’”²⁷ Daniel Hill notices a similar problem with Plantinga’s A/C model, and says that “[i]n disposing of the traditional model of giving arguments or evidence for all one’s religious beliefs,

²⁶ Muslims believe that the Old and New Testaments, though a divine revelation from Allah, have become textually corrupt over time. The Koran is the corrective to this textual difficulty.

²⁷ Deane-Peter Baker, “Plantinga’s Reformed Epistemology: What’s the Question?” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 57 (2005), 85.

Plantinga may have disposed also of an inter-subjectively agreed standard which allows us to debate, argue, and evangelize. In creating an impregnable fortress for the rationality of Christianity, Plantinga may have done the same favour for the other theistic religions too.”²⁸ It is not just theistic religions that cause difficulties for Plantinga’s model. Even a non-theistic religion like Confucianism raises exactly the same epistemic dilemma.

David W. Tien makes a strong case that the neo-Confucian thought of Chinese scholar Wang Yangming (1472-1529) can, according to Plantinga’s definition of warrant, be just as epistemically justified as Christian belief. Tien says in place of the Holy Spirit, Yangming substituted the *liangzhi*, which is defined as “the innate fully formed cognitive and affective faculty that enables one to know the *li* (commonly translated as ‘principle’) of the mind and universe.”²⁹ Tien, much like Baker and Hill, sees Plantinga’s position as basically self-defeating for the Christian epistemologist. For Plantinga to escape the charge of epistemic arbitrariness, he must admit that non-Christian belief can be on an epistemic par with Christian belief. But this concession considerably weakens his argument for the rationality of Christian belief.”³⁰

A host of critics have greeted Plantinga’s inability to cope with the challenges raised by other world religions. Gary Gutting alleges (*a la* John Hick) that Plantinga is on questionable moral ground here because “believing *p* because its truth is supported by *my* intuition is thus an *epistemological egoism* just as arbitrary and unjustifiable as ethical

²⁸ Daniel Hill, “Warranted Christian Belief—A Review Article,” *Themelios* 26 (2001): 49.

²⁹ David W. Tien, “Warranted Neo-Confucian Belief: Religious Pluralism and the Affections in the Epistemologies of Wang Yangming (1472-1529) and Alvin Plantinga,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 55 (2004): 32.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

egoism.”³¹ J. L. Schellenberg charges Plantinga with religious imperialism, for he claims that no one religion can be shown to be more objectively true than any of the others.³² David Basinger follows suit, charging that “[u]nless it can be demonstrated on epistemic grounds that are (or should be) accepted by all rational people that proponents of the competing perspectives are not actually on equal epistemic footing, the exclusivist [i.e., Plantinga] must consider his challenger on equal epistemic footing and is thus obliged to engage in belief assessment.”³³

Even within the various denominations of historical Christianity, Plantinga’s A/C model fares no better. Plantinga, of course, is writing from a Reformed position, but the possession of the Holy Spirit does not belong exclusively to the spiritual descendants of Calvin (as Plantinga would certainly admit). So the question inevitably arises, *which* type of Christianity does Plantinga think his model supports? Terrence Tilley notes that “[f]or many Catholic Christians, literal belief in the Real Presence is basic. . . . I see no reason to reject the claim that those who hold such a belief in the Real Presence cannot be on an epistemic par with those who hold a belief that God is speaking to me now [this is an example that Plantinga sometimes uses to support the truth of his A/C model].”³⁴ Tilley makes the same point about the traditional Calvinist understanding of the fall as

³¹ Quoted by Plantinga in *Warranted Christian Belief*, 449.

³² J. L. Schellenberg, “Religious Experience and Religious Diversity: A Reply to Alston,” in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, ed. K. Meeker and P. Quinn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 213.

³³ David Basinger, *Religious Diversity: A Philosophical Assessment* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 26-27.

³⁴ Terrence W. Tilley, “Reformed Epistemology and Religious Fundamentalism: How Basic Are Our Basic Beliefs?” *Modern Theology* 6 (1990): 240-41.

bringing mankind to a status of utter ruin. This just “seems” to be properly basic to a Reformed Christian, but not so obvious as for one steeped in the Catholic tradition.³⁵ And Plantinga cannot object to a strictly literal, “fundamentalist” interpretation of the Bible, either, Tilley maintains, for the same Holy Spirit convicts fundamentalist Christians that their reading of scripture is the correct one, despite the more “sophisticated” views that various non-fundamentalists Christians may take on the matter of biblical inerrancy. Thus Tilley can say that “[o]n the Reformed epistemologists’ grounds, there is no good reason to believe that the fundamentalists’ practice is unreliable or [their] beliefs are unjustified.”³⁶ Tilley’s words here proved prophetic, for Plantinga, writing in an article published in 2001 (one year after *Warranted Christian Belief*) avers that he does not hold to a fundamentalist interpretation of scripture, and that he does not necessarily take certain portions of the Old Testament as literally true, because they portray God in ways that do not seem to match the portrayal of God in the New Testament. Rather, he says, his A/C model confirms for the believer that the Bible is true concerning the great things of the gospel, not every detail recoded in scripture.³⁷ But for fundamentalist Christians, the total inerrancy of scripture *is* one of the great things of the gospel. Indeed, they claim, it is the only way we can accurately know the *other* great things of the Bible. Plantinga’s A/C model thus has the potential to create a schism among Reformed, Catholic, and fundamentalist believers for which he offers no solution.

³⁵ Ibid., 241.

³⁶ Ibid., 247.

³⁷ Alvin Plantinga, “Internalism, Externalism, Defeaters and Arguments for Christian Belief,” *Philosophia Christi* 2 (2001), 388-89.

The Parity Argument

Behind Plantinga's idea that Christian belief possesses proper warrant is the idea that Christian *experience* can be a valid test for religious truth. In other words, what the Christian experiences is said to possess warrant, because those experiences are based upon the instigation of the Holy Spirit. Here Plantinga is largely inspired by the work of Scottish "common sense" philosopher Thomas Reid who, in reaction against Descartes, taught that our senses are for the most part trustworthy and can serve as a basis for true knowledge of the world around us.³⁸ According to Donald Hatcher, Roderick Chisholm also has been a great influence on Plantinga. Chisholm teaches that there are two basic approaches when developing an epistemology, the methodist approach, and the particularist approach. Methodists think that we should begin by trying to reach "agreement on a general method or set of principles suitable for determining just which beliefs are indeed reasonable. Unfortunately, according to Chisholm, one can always ask Methodists how they *know* the principles they have adopted for determining the 'reasonableness' of claims are themselves feasible."³⁹ Particularists, on the other hand, think epistemology begins

³⁸ For an introduction to Reid's thoughts on religion, see Dale Tuggy, "Reid's Philosophy of Religion," in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid*, ed. Terence Cuneo and Rene Van Woudenberg (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 289-312. Interestingly enough, Reid employed the same parity argument about God and other minds that Plantinga did in his 1967 book of the same name. Reid writes, "there is as much reason to believe that there is a supreme being, as that there are minds besides our own" (quoted from Tuggy, 295).

³⁹ Donald Hatcher, "Some Problems with Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 10 (1989): 21. Hatcher is making reference to Chisholm's *The Foundations of Knowing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

by identifying certain beliefs that most persons would agree to be reasonable, and then, by way of induction, try to determine what common qualities or general principles all of these acceptable beliefs exhibit. The problem here is, as Kant pointed out, also one of circularity: if we really do not know what criteria must be met to make a belief rational, how can we know the beliefs people *think* are rational are indeed rational?⁴⁰

Plantinga, Hatcher claims, is a particularist, and wants to insist that the belief in God is one of many certain immediate non-inferential beliefs which most persons would agree are reasonable to hold, such as ‘I see a tree,’ or ‘I had breakfast this morning.’⁴¹

But Plantinga’s contention that religious beliefs are analogous to other beliefs (such as memory beliefs) is wrong for at least two reasons. First, “it seems that the object of religious experience (God) is not exactly analogous to other objects of our inward experience.”⁴² Plantinga would have us believe that a Christian’s experience of God is similar to, say, a memory experience. For example, Plantinga uses the following hypothetical example. He is placed under arrest by the police as a suspect in a crime. But, at the time the alleged crime took place, he was far away, hiking in the hills. However, no one saw him on the hiking trail, so he states, “I hold a belief for which I can’t give an argument and which I know is disputed by others. Am I therefore guilty of epistemological egoism? Surely not. Why not? Because I *remember* where I was, and *that* puts me within my rights in believing that I was off hiking, even if others disagree with me.”⁴³ Plantinga’s point here is that he is justified in claiming innocence because

⁴⁰ Hatcher, “Some Problems with Plantinga’s Reformed Epistemology,” 22.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 22. Plantinga first began thinking in earnest along these lines in 1967’s *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴³ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 450–51.

he knows, based on his memory, where he was when the crime happened. He has epistemological certitude about this, and this is analogous, he claims, to the epistemological certitude Christians have about the existence of God. Plantinga says memory beliefs, just like God-beliefs, cannot be empirically proven, but they are both nonetheless true for the one who experiences them.

But the analogy does not work because, assuming his memory is functioning properly, he really *was* hiking in the hills. Had anyone else been there, they would have seen him, thus confirming his memory of the event. Had a camera been rolling at the time, it would have filmed him strolling along, far away from the crime scene. If he goes back to the trail he hiked, his boot-prints will be there. If he was careless, perhaps he lost a few personal items (like a wallet with his identification in it) on the trail. A hermit who lives in the hills could be questioned and, if he saw Plantinga, would confirm Plantinga's alibi.⁴⁴

Or consider my memory beliefs of the terrorist attack in New York on September 11th, 2001. My belief is not a non-provable, subjective event, but one that millions of persons around the globe can confirm. Film of the burning twin towers further confirms my personal belief as reliable. This type of memory belief is obviously a true one, whereas my personal experience of God may not be true, since it cannot be confirmed by the same sort of evidence. Thus it seems that memory beliefs are in no way analogous to

⁴⁴ A similar example is used by Richard Grigg in "Theism and Proper Basicity: A Response to Plantinga," where he notes that "is it not only through such outsidings sources [those that confirm our memory beliefs] that we can become aware of a defect in our equipment?" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 14 (1983): 6. In other words, memory beliefs do not occur in isolation, and they can be either confirmed or disconfirmed by empirical evidence.

beliefs about God. But perhaps Plantinga has in mind the type of memory belief that is unique to the individual, as in, “I remember that yesterday I was thinking about the War of 1812.” It is true that this type of memory belief cannot be proven in the same way as the September 11th example, but Plantinga’s analogy still would not hold, for every human being on the planet has had had a similar experience; everyone can remember what they thought about yesterday. However, not everyone has personal experience of God. And, among those that do, some experience the divine as Jesus, some as Allah, some as Krishna, and so forth. Indeed, as Richard Grigg points out, sensory perception of the natural world (e.g., the example of beholding the starry heaven and being convinced that God is its author, an example Plantinga often refers to) does not even lead one necessarily to *religious* beliefs: “I wish to point out that while nearly everyone who has experience x is led to the belief that he or she is seeing a tree, experience y leads some to a particular belief about God but leads many others in different directions. In other words, it seems to me that it is not necessarily the case that the theist has experiences others do not. . . . For example, many persons have had the experience of being awed by the beauty of the universe without being led to believe in a wise creator.”⁴⁵ So, David Basinger writes, “the reason we do not question the reliability of most of our faculties is that such faculties consistently generate similar beliefs in most individuals, the fact that religious faculties do not, in general, produce similar beliefs in

⁴⁵ Ibid., 10.

similar contexts does make it much more difficult to assume they possess the same sort of reliability status.”⁴⁶

When Plantinga claims that memory perceptions are analogous to experience of God, does any Christian actually believe this? That is, would the average Christian claim that there is parity between his or her memory beliefs, and the faith in Christian doctrine that he or she espouses: “plenty of people who do believe in God do not take that belief to be on a par with a basic perceptual belief in respect of being basically evident in experience.”⁴⁷ I would go farther, and suggest that almost *no* Christian would equate memories, which I showed above can be independently verified in a number of ways with personal religious beliefs that often cannot be so verified. In fact, “many Christian believers who do have religious experiences in which they are in some sense directly aware of God’s presence, His help, even His voice, would not assimilate that awareness to having a basic perceptual belief—because (especially on reflection) they recognize that they are choosing to interpret their experiences in a religious way when that interpretation is not unavoidable for them.”⁴⁸ There is an element in choosing to believe certain religious doctrines that simply is not present in memory perceptions; memories inevitably happen as a result of experience, but the same cannot always be said of religious beliefs.

In a similar vein Richard Swinburne notes that Plantinga’s notion of warranted Christian belief, based on individual experience, rests on a faulty premise:

⁴⁶ David Basinger, “Plantinga, Pluralism, and Justified Religious Belief,” *Faith and Philosophy* 8 (1991): 68.

⁴⁷ John Bishop and Imran Aijaz, “How to Answer the De Jure Question About Christian Belief,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 56 (2004): 122.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

Despite what Plantinga seems to say, there is a clear and all-important question about whether a belief is rational (or justified) which has nothing to do with whether it is justified by the believer's own lights or with whether it is produced by "properly functioning" processes. In a strong internalist⁴⁹ sense, a belief of a person S is rational if it is rendered (evidentially) probable by S's evidence. . . . scientists, historians, judges and juries ask this question about their hypotheses. They have criteria for when evidence makes one hypothesis more probable than some other hypothesis or more probable than its negation.⁵⁰

Swinburne is not attempting to completely negate the value of Plantinga's work, he merely wants to stress that the rationality of a belief cannot rest *entirely* in the mind of an individual; religious beliefs, like any other beliefs, are subject to challenges and critiques. Plantinga might respond that Swinburne is simply resurrecting the ghost of foundationalism, but that is not necessarily the case. One need not, along with the classical foundationalists, declare that *everyone* must agree that a religious belief is properly basic, based on some set of pre-determined "universal" truths. But at the same time, the matter cannot be left entirely to the cognitive process of a single individual either.

The Noetic Effects of Sin

Another crucial component in Plantinga's model that he thinks makes Christian religious experience unique is that Christian theology takes adequate account of the noetic effects of sin, whereas other religions do not. Thus, Planting claims, other

⁴⁹ The difference between internalist and externalist epistemologies is succinctly summed up by Stephen Wykstra as follows. For externalists, "a true belief has positive epistemic status when it is produced by a 'reliable process,' a process that produces, or would produce, true beliefs with high frequency." Such externalists reject the "traditional 'internalist' assumption that the additive that turns true belief into knowledge must be something to which the subject has special access, something, that is accessible within the subject's perspective." Quoted from Wykstra's "Externalism, Proper Inferentiality, and Sensible Evidentialism," *Topoi* 14 (1995): 111.

⁵⁰ Richard Swinburne, "Plantinga on Warrant," *Religious Studies* 37 (2001):207.

religious experiences are not on the same epistemic par as Christian ones, because those who have them are blinded by the sin that the Christian tradition teaches has wounded our mental powers (or, in the case of the Reformed Christian tradition, almost completely debased them). “Sin induces a blindness, dullness, stupidity, imperceptiveness, whereby we are blinded to God, cannot hear his voice, do not recognize his beauty and glory, and may even go so far as to deny that he exists.”⁵¹ The solution is of course provided by his A/C model, in which the work of the Holy Spirit features so prominently. “Regeneration heals the ravages of sin. . . . Just what are the *cognitive* benefits of regeneration? First, there is the repair of the *sensus divinitatis*, so that once again we can see God and be put in mind of him in the sorts of situations in which that belief-producing process is designed to work.”⁵² But since the Holy Spirit is only available to Christians, it is only they who can benefit from the Spirit’s reparative work to their shattered cognitive abilities; it is only they who can experience a restored sense of the divine, and thereby have veridical experiences of God.

This seems to be a fail-safe way in which to construct one’s epistemological house. In effect, Plantinga is saying that those adherents of other religions, no matter how meaningful their religious experiences may be, cannot really trust what they have experienced, for they are working with faulty cognitive equipment, not to mention a badly flawed *sensus divinitatis*. And, they can expect no help from the Holy Spirit. But there are two difficulties that emerge here. First, while it is true that Christianity is the only religion that has anything like a doctrine of *original* sin, it is not unique in teaching

⁵¹ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 280.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 280-81.

that sin beclouds and harms our ability to clearly perceive spiritual things. Islam, too, has a similar understanding of sin as detrimental to our ability to rightly know the things of

God. One Muslim scholar writes of the descendants of the first human pair:

in the succeeding centuries, by and by, people swerved from the straight way of life (Islam) and adopted different crooked ways. They not only lost the Guidance owing to their negligence but also tampered with it because of their wickedness. They attributed to others the qualities and powers of Allah and associated others to rank with Him as gods and ascribed His rights to others. They invented different kinds of religions (ways of life) by mixing up all sorts of superstitions, wrong theories and false philosophy with the Guidance that was given by Allah. They discarded the right, just and moral principles taught by Allah and corrupted them and made such laws of life as suited their prejudices and lusts, and filled Allah's Earth with chaos.⁵³

Another Muslim thinker pens the following statement to describe humanity's sinful rebellion against God. Note that what he says sounds remarkably like what St. Paul says in Romans 1 about humans willfully rejecting God. In fact, the words have a fairly Calvinistic flavor to them. "The perversity of rejection (*kufri*) can only be understood in terms of men's refusal to have faith in or believe in what they secretly know. The Old Testament, the Gospels and the Koran concur that men willfully reject their creator. But this implies that men can disbelieve in what they know; knowledge does not entail faith although faith may entail, indeed encompass, knowledge."⁵⁴

Furthermore, the example of Islam also proves Plantinga is wrong when he claims a unique status for Christian belief because it is the only religion that has an epistemological design plan to provide warrant for Christian beliefs. God, taking

⁵³ Abdul A'La Mawdudi, *An Introduction to the Koran* (Jamaica, NY: Islamic Circle of North America, 1982), 5.

⁵⁴ Shabbir Akhtar, *A Faith for All Seasons: Islam and Western Modernity* (London: Bellew Publishing, 1990), 30.

cognizance of our postlapsarian state, gives Christians the guidance of the Holy Spirit that enables the Christian to break through the noetic darkness caused by sin and perceive God's truth.⁵⁵ But Islam also has a design plan in its holy scriptures, the Koran. According to Muslim belief, the Old and New Testaments are God's word, but they have grown corrupted over the centuries, and are no longer entirely reliable. The Koran is the epistemic corrective to the faulty Bible. Additionally, Islam teaches that man has forgotten the truth about God, he has drifted away from the pure monotheism of Adam and Eve. It was Muhammad's task to recall humanity to their pure monotheistic roots. Just what difference is there, from a design plan point of view, between Plantinga's understanding of the Holy Spirit and the Islamic understanding of the role of the Koran in restoring our thoughts to a properly monotheistic view of God? Plantinga never considers the question.⁵⁶

These examples prove that Plantinga cannot claim any kind of exclusive status for his A/C model based on its incorporation of the noetic effects of sin, for the same idea seems to be present (though not in so doctrinal a form) in Islam. Again, this is another example of how Plantinga's notion of warranted Christian belief seems to work equally well for a non-Christian religion.

⁵⁵ For a good summary of Plantinga's teaching on the design plan, see Beilby, *Epistemology as Theology*, 186-88.

⁵⁶ Plantinga does point out, rightly I think, that the necessity of a design plan as grounds for warranted belief would rule out certain less sophisticated forms of religion, and certain bizarre beliefs, which he and his critics have come to refer to as the "Great Pumpkin" objection. This refers to the comic strip *Peanuts*, where the gullible Linus waits all night in the pumpkin patch, fully expecting the Great Pumpkin to appear and dole out Halloween treats. Linus of course is a fideist; he has no rational grounds for believing that such a being exists, no reliance upon a great Pumpkin design plan that would tell him his faith in the Orange One is warranted.

But there is another, perhaps greater problem with Plantinga's usage of sin in his epistemic model. "It would seem that epistemologies which include sin are inherently flawed. For one thing, to use 'sin' to explain some person's inability to 'see the truth,' appears to involve the Reformed epistemologist in circular reasoning."⁵⁷ Plantinga writes that "given our fallen nature and our natural apathy to the message of the gospel, faith will have to be a gift. . . one that wouldn't come to us in the ordinary run of things, one that requires supernatural and extraordinary activity on the part of God."⁵⁸ Thus can the Reformed epistemologist, if he takes Plantinga's ideas seriously, reject any non-Christian truth claim as wrong because it is the result of a sin-darkened mind, whereas the Christian believer has the inner light and guidance of the Holy Spirit. But, it is precisely such concepts as sin and the Holy Spirit that the non-Christian does not believe in. And again, we are back to the same kind of tautology with which I began this chapter. Within this type of epistemological frame work, the Plantingian Christian is isolated from any attack; those who would oppose him cannot be taken seriously because they are the victims of damaged noetic faculties.⁵⁹ Donald Hatcher writes that

To account for disagreements by appealing to "sin" undermines rational debate. It in effect tells those who are skeptical that the reason they have problems 'seeing the truth' of theistic religious claims is 'sin.' Because of sin, Plantinga says, they have improperly functioning epistemic faculties. To my mind this is a very unhealthy

⁵⁷ Hatcher, "Some Problems with Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology," 26.

⁵⁸ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 269.

⁵⁹ This is precisely the problem inherent in the apologetic system of Cornelius Van Til, The former professor of apologetics at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia who developed the so-called presuppositional approach to apologetics. For my critique of Van Til and John Frame, one of his most ardent devotees, see "Is Cornelius Van Til's Apologetic Method Christian, or Merely Theistic?" *Evangelical Quarterly* LXXV (2003): 257-268.

approach to criticism, one which is all too common in modern philosophy. For example, Marxists tend to do the same thing to those who claim not to agree with their claims. If one cannot ‘see’ the truth of the Marxist description of social relations, it is surely because one’s conceptual framework has been tainted by bourgeois ideology or one is a member of the ruling class. Heidegger does the same thing in *Being and Time*. If one disagrees with his phenomenological, he says it is because one’s consciousness, hopelessly lost in average-everydayness, has “fallen to the They” and is closed to the Truth.⁶⁰

The Holy Spirit and the Bible in Plantinga’s A/C Model

Much was written in chapter three about the extensive role of the Holy Spirit in Plantinga’s A/C model. But there are several problems that need attention regarding the precise role that the Spirit performs in the lives of believers. Plantinga must be treated fairly here; his A/C model is precisely that, a model. It is an idealized account of how he thinks God enables the Christian to perceive the great things of the gospel. So he cannot be faulted if not every Christian conforms exactly to the precepts of his model. Plantinga admits as much when he writes, “for whatever reason, the deliverances of the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit seem to come in all different degrees of strength.”⁶¹ Still, critics have pointed out that there are large areas of confusion surrounding the Spirit’s activity in Plantinga’s writing, and precisely how the Holy Spirit goes about creating properly basic belief is often confounding.

One problematic area seems to be Plantinga’s’ Arminian understanding of the Spirit’s work. Just as I pointed out in chapter 2 of this dissertation that Plantinga has been accused (successfully, I think) of using an Arminian solution to solve the riddle of

⁶⁰ Hatcher, “Some Problems with Plantinga’s Reformed Epistemology,” 26.

⁶¹ From email correspondence between James Beilby and Plantinga. Cited on page 155 of Beilby’s essay, “Plantinga’s Model of Warranted Christian Belief.”

evil and the problem of free will *vis a vis* divine sovereignty, so a similar situation obtains here. Listen to Plantinga on how the believer appropriates the faith that the Holy Spirit provides: “I’m thinking of the Holy Spirit as giving us a chance to see something of the beauty and truth of the great things of the gospel: but it is still possible to freely accept and freely reject. The work of creating faith in us is subsequent to such an acceptance. But that’s not part of the model—that’s just the way I do in fact think it works. The Holy Spirit does not, on my way of thinking, cause me to accept the invitation.”⁶² It is almost impossible to imagine any of Plantinga’s Reformed forbears, say, Calvin, or Edwards, making such a claim. But, Plantinga says this Arminian element is not part of his A/C model. However, if it were, it might explain a great many of the discrepancies that the model seems to produce in Christians, to which we will turn our attention below. So, Plantinga is saying that he understands the Holy Spirit to operate in a purely Arminian fashion, offering but not “forcing” grace upon the individual’s heart and mind. In fact, I suspect that Plantinga’s latent Arminianism does indeed inform his model, and that may account for the various discrepancies his model seems to produce.

Perhaps the primary discrepancy that seems to arise from Plantinga’s model is, just what does the Holy Spirit enable Christians to take as properly basic (and therefore warranted) belief, and just how firmly are they caused to hold that belief? Responding to the criticism that Christian beliefs are culture- and time-bound, and therefore not so properly basic as Plantinga supposes,⁶³ Plantinga states the following:

⁶² Personal correspondence between Plantinga and James Beilby, cited in Beilby, “Plantinga’s Model of Warranted Christian Belief,” 157.

⁶³ See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 2.

suppose I accept (CP) [central premise] which is itself a religious or philosophical belief. Isn't it clear that there are times and places such that if I had been born in nineteenth-century New Guinea, or medieval France, or seventeenth-century Japan, I would (very likely) not have accepted CP). . . . No matter what you think of that argument, however, why cant it be that we know more at some times than at others? Had Einstein been born in the eighteenth century, he would not have believes special relativity; nothing follows about special relativity. Many now think it is wrong to treat someone with hatred or contempt or indifference on the mere grounds that they are of a different race; their views are not automatically unwarranted just because they might have believed otherwise if they had been brought up in Nazi Germany or ancient Sparta.⁶⁴

Initially, there are two things wrong here. First, special relativity is true, *objectively* true, whether or not anyone believes in it. It is in no way analogous to a religious belief, which is not a matter of scientific certainty. Second, the example of racism involves changing cultural attitudes over time. Again, it is not like a religious belief, for all religions claims that they teach *timeless* truths as revealed by their founder, be it Jesus, Muhammad, and so forth, so, it is unclear what point Plantinga wishes to make. As I understand it, he is trying to counter Hick's claim that religious truth cannot be seen as set in stone; he is saying that even if Hick is right, not much follows that is harmful to Plantinga's religious epistemology. But here Plantinga seems to be caught in a dilemma. If he claims that the Holy Spirit produces in believers true knowledge about spiritual matters, then that knowledge should be the same in every generation. Otherwise, it would not be a firm foundation for faith, which Plantinga consistently claims that it is. But, if the Holy Spirit teaches believers new things all the time, opening up Christian minds to new spiritual truths, how can the work of the Spirit be said to be a firm and sure foundation for the great things of the gospel? For what the Holy Spirit revealed to a Christian 1000 years ago could be radically different than what he reveals to me today.

⁶⁴ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 428.

And this is precisely what we see when we look at the lives of real Christians, rather than paradigmatic models that might, if they existed, perfectly illustrate the proper functioning of the A/C model. Would Plantinga claim that the Holy Spirit was providing properly basic beliefs to Christian 300 years ago, when virtually all Christians took the creation story in Genesis 1 literally, including descent from a literal Adam and Eve? This is not a peripheral matter, for it is precisely the idea that we have inherited the sin nature of our first parents upon which St. Paul, in Romans, builds his case that Christ is the second Adam, and therefore the savior of humanity. A Christian of 300 years ago would have insisted that full acceptance of the historicity of the Adam and Eve story was a properly basic belief, one essential for understanding the gospel of Christ. Today, few educated Christians would insist on the existence of an actual first human couple. Has the Holy Spirit provided us with new information or have we changed our own minds, based on the findings of geology and anthropology? Richard Fumerton writes, “Christians disagree radically with each other when it comes to what Scripture means. Suppose that Christian X interprets some passage in the Old Testament to mean P, while Christian Y interprets that same passage to mean Q, where P and Q are incompatible. Both feel that peculiar conviction that Plantinga thinks is sometimes the work of the Holy Spirit. Is it not absurd to suppose that X might have properly basic warrant for his belief while Y does not?”⁶⁵ Fumerton points out that the dilemma is not present only in groups of Christians, but also within the minds of individual Christians: suppose a Christian “keeps changing his mind about the meaning of a given passage but every time he reaches a conclusion about what the passage asserts feels that same conviction of truth.

⁶⁵ Fumerton, “Plantinga, Warrant, and Christian Belief,” 347.

Can one seriously entertain the possibility that one of the beliefs has properly basic warrant while the others do not?”⁶⁶

It is investigable that the A/C model results in this type of difficulties, considering that Plantinga seems to think that The Holy Spirit provides the believer all he or she needs to know about the Bible, devoid of any historical or academic considerations. He writes that the Bible authenticates itself “in the sense that for belief in the great things of the gospel to be justified, rational and warranted, no historical evidence and argument for the teaching in question, or for the veracity or reliability or divine character of Scripture (or the part of Scripture in which it is taught) are necessary. The process by which these beliefs have warrant for the believer swings free of those historical and other considerations; these beliefs have warrant in the basic way.”⁶⁷

Commenting on Plantinga’s understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in the task of authenticating the scripture for believers, Patrick Roche writes that “the immediacy of this ‘revelation to the mind’ by the Holy Spirit is such that the internal testimony/instigation of the Holy Spirit occurs without reflection or inference involving historical, linguistic, textual or theological considerations on the part of the believer.”⁶⁸ This position of Plantinga’s is a very unusual one for a trained Christian scholar to take regarding how the believer appropriates the Bible, and it opens up a vast array of problems for which Plantinga, if aware of them, does not provide a satisfactory solution. And, as Roche points out, much of what is contained in scripture is not clearly set forth in bold propositional terms that the Holy Spirit could simply “reveal” to anyone. Rather, “the doctrinal content of Scripture unpacks into a web and hierarchy of belief. The core

⁶⁶ Ibid., 347.

⁶⁷ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 262.

⁶⁸ Patrick Roche, “Knowledge of God and Alvin Plantinga’s Reformed Epistemology,” *Quodlibet: Online Journal of Christian Theology and Philosophy* 4 (2002): 4. Accessed at: www.quodlibet.net/roche-plantinga.shtml.

doctrines of the Christian faith (trinity, incarnation, atonement, etc.) are in fact highly interrelated and inferential constructions. This is well exemplified by the doctrinal content of the statement ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself’ to which Plantinga makes frequent reference.”⁶⁹ Roche is not rejecting the work of the Holy Spirit in producing such beliefs, but he is rejecting the idea that this is the *only* way in which such belief could be produced. That God was in Christ reconciling believers to Himself “is inferentially constructed from an extensive range of other beliefs involving (for example) sophisticated and complex exegesis of Scripture.”⁷⁰

In one of his mid-career articles, writing against what he takes to be an anti-miraculous bias on the part of New Testament scholar Barnabas Lindars concerning miracle claims in the New Testament, Plantinga seems to be more open to the combined idea of faith plus reason when attempting to interpret the Bible, and writes that “isn’t it simple common sense to think that a Christian scholar (or the Christian scholarly community) should use everything she knows in pursuing her discipline? . . . If your aim is to reach as much as you can of the full-fledge, full-orbed truth about the matter at hand, then presumably the right way to proceed is to use all of your resources, everything you know, including what you know by faith.”⁷¹ Still, this essay was written in 1987, and by the time of Plantinga’s fully mature work on Christian epistemology, 2000’s *Warranted Christian Belief*, his understanding of biblical exegesis is based much more upon his A/C

⁶⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 4.

⁷¹ Alvin Plantinga, “Sheehan’s Shenanigans: How Theology Becomes Tomfoolery,” in *The Analytic Theist*, 326.

model than upon the traditional tools of biblical scholarship. In that essay from 1987, Plantinga makes the point that biblical study that does not allow for personal faith smacks of “classical Foundationalism and shares its liabilities.”⁷² In this he is surely correct.

But the full-blown A/C epistemology he espouses in *Warranted Christian Belief*, according to Roche, is merely a new form of foundationalism to replace the classical foundationalism that Plantinga so despises and deems a philosophical and epistemological failure. Roche bluntly states the A/C model “simply does not make sense,” and that “Plantinga has attempted to squeeze an understanding of the epistemic priority of Christian belief into a foundationalist mould. Plantinga’s account of warrant is set within a foundationalist epistemology in which the core doctrines of the Christian faith are understood to be warranted in a manner that secures the proper basicity of these beliefs.”⁷³ Plantinga has painted himself into as epistemological corner here, according to Roche. Plantinga firmly rejects the possibility of classical foundationalism as a valid starting part for theological and philosophical discussion, yet his own epistemology must, in the end, be seen as a resurrected version of the foundationalist error: “proper basicity of Christian belief cannot be secured in terms of the requirements of classical foundationalism because Plantinga demonstrated that classical foundationalism is self-referentially incoherent. But Plantinga retains the framework of foundationalism within which he develops a particularist account of the warrant of Christian belief directed towards securing the epistemic autonomy of Christian belief.”⁷⁴

⁷² Ibid., 326.

⁷³ Roche, “Knowledge of God and Plantinga’s Reformed Epistemology,” 4.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 4-5.

Dirk-Martin Grube agrees, and sees a double standard at work in Plantinga's rejection of foundationalism when it suits his purposes, along with his reformulation and acceptance of it when it can be used to bolster his A/C model. "On the one hand, Plantinga regards properly basic propositions [for instance, of the classically foundationalist kind] to be open to challenge, thus as not being critique-immune. On the other hand, he attributes to them [when they assume the form of the A/C model] a far-reaching de facto critique-immunity. . . . It seems that Plantinga oscillates between both positions, pulling out of his pocket whatever suits his purposes in a given context."⁷⁵ When someone with a bizarre belief claims that belief is properly basic (Nazism, or voodoo), "he emphasizes that claims to proper basicity are open to challenge. . . . However in the context of supporting the Reformed project, he emphasizes the de facto critique-immunity of properly basic propositions. . . you can't have the cake and eat it, too."⁷⁶ It is this frustrating aspect of Plantinga's work that has led some to charge that his is a fideist, that he is basing his A/C model on a foundationalist understanding of reality, even while denying the validity of that approach to epistemology. Roche notes that while attempting to prove that his A/C model is not fideistic in nature "Plantinga in fact incorporates the very idea of what it is to count as a 'deliverance of reason' within the metaphysical and ontological commitments/presuppositions of the A/C model. This is a confirmation that

⁷⁵ Dirk-Martin Grube, "Religious Experience After the Demise of Foundationalism," *Religious Studies* 31 (1995): 44.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

‘fideism’ understood in terms of the notion of ‘epistemic autonomy’ is central to Plantinga’s account of Reformed epistemology.”⁷⁷

Conclusion

To sum up this chapter, I will finish with a rather lengthy passage from Patrick Roche, who sums up many of the problems that I have pointed out that are inherent within Plantinga’s A/C model:

Truth is “the way things are,” but Plantinga’s position is that it is beyond the competence of philosophy or any other competence to establish the truth of Christian belief. This leaves the Christian believer caught between the self-referential incoherence of classical foundationalism and the Rortyan understanding (as presented by Plantinga) of truth as a human construct—with no escape route in terms of a coherentist account of warrant. In this situation Plantinga recommends a “certain epistemic hardihood” taking the form of something like a Lutheran epistemic heroics: “here I stand; this is the way the world looks to me.” The import of this “here I stand” position is that Plantinga’s attempt to provide a warrant for Christian belief that would establish the foundationalist “proper basicity” of Christian belief terminates, not merely in skepticism with respect to warrant, but in a radical subjectivism—that is, in irrationality on any definition of that term. The considerations mean that in *Warranted Christian Belief* Plantinga’s project of ‘Reformed epistemology’ has not merely reached an epistemic “dead-end” but has in fact been developed in a manner that undermines the credibility of the core exclusivist truth claims of the Christian tradition.⁷⁸

In the next chapter, I offer some possible ways for Plantinga to avoid the problems that seem to be inherent in his A/C Model.

⁷⁷ Roche, “Knowledge of God and Alvin Plantinga’s Reformed Epistemology,” 6.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

CHAPTER SIX

A Way Forward: How Plantinga's Epistemology could be Strengthened

Introduction

In the previous five chapters, I have shown two things. One, that Plantinga's free will defense, does, on the whole, what it is intended to do. It defeats the logical contradictions that critics have always insisted bedeviled the Christian approach to the problem of evil. And although not everyone is convinced by Plantinga's work in this field, there is an amazing amount of consensus (even among non-Christian scholars) that his free will defense succeeds, at least on some level. However, the same cannot be said about his concept of warranted Christian belief. Outside of those who are firmly in the Reformed epistemological camp, very few scholars (even Christian ones) are fully satisfied with Plantinga's Christian epistemology. I think the solution lies in taking what is best from his free will defense, and incorporating those elements into his concept of warranted Christian faith. That is, I think the methodological approach he used in his work on the problem of evil can be brought to bear successfully on his epistemological methodology. To that end, I want to explore in this chapter what a revised version of Plantinga's A/C model might look like. I will attempt to re-fashion his A/C model after his free will defense. To do so, I will apply the same type of logical rigor to his epistemology that he applied to the problem of evil. For it makes little sense for Plantinga to rely so heavily on reason when defending Christianity against its most serious obstacle, namely, the problem of evil, and then abandon reason when it comes to formulating his epistemology. In fact, the type of logic he employed in constructing his

free will defense will greatly strengthen his A/C model. To assist in this endeavor, I will be incorporating the evidentialist approach to Christian theology used by Richard Swinburne who, along with Plantinga, stands at the forefront of Christian philosophy of religion.

Plantinga has always taken great pains to explain that the problem with evil and its relation to theism/Christianity, at least from the standpoint of philosophy, is that contradiction seems inherent. Thus we recall Epicurus' summary of the matter: an all-loving, all powerful God should want to, or be able to, stop evil. But, since evil remains, his goodness, his omnipotence, or his very existence is called into question. Plantinga devoted much of his considerable talent to showing that there really is not a contradiction for the Christian when faced with the problem of evil. But what if one were to apply this same standard of non-contradiction to the realm of epistemology? What if Plantinga chose to approach not just Christianity, but other world religions as well, with an eye toward retaining only what was non-contradictory in them, and jettisoning the rest as obviously false? The result would be twofold. First, the most serious problem in his A/C model, that of how to adjudicate between rival truth-claims, would no longer be an intractable dilemma as it is now for Plantinga (who after all never really attempts to wrestle with the issue). Second, positive reasons could be advanced for accepting Christianity as true. And, as I will show, this will not violate Plantinga's Reformed sensibilities by relying too much upon natural theology, but only upon the type of common sense reasoning that even Calvin, Aquinas, and sometimes Plantinga himself accepts.

In chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation, I explained how Plantinga's inability to adjudicate between rival religions' truth claims renders his idea of properly basic belief in the Christian God an untenable position. Why couldn't the Muslim, the Jew or the Hindu make the same epistemological claims to basicity as does the Christian? Plantinga never attempts to resolve this, and for some inexplicable reason does not even seem to think it is much of a problem. But, I would like to look at how, using the type of approach Plantinga used in his free will defense, one could at least begin to winnow the playing field as it were, and prove that not all religions can make an equivalent claim to having a properly basic understanding of the divine. Plantinga agrees that not all religions are created equal, so to speak, but never tells us why (beyond a fideistic appeal to the instigation of the Holy Spirit) and this simply is unacceptable. As Hugo Meynell, a Roman Catholic critic of Plantinga puts it, "either reasons cannot even in principle be given for a belief, in which case there is no *warrant* for it; or they can, in which case there is *evidence* for it."¹ Again, this does not rule out the appeal to authority (be it the authority of the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit, or that of scripture). "It is important to note that this point in no way impugns the acceptance of belief on authority, which is often very reasonable. I am no expert on chemistry; so it is more reasonable for me to accept than to reject the claims of those who are expert on the nature of rare earth elements."²

¹ Hugo Meynell, "Faith, Foundationalism, and Wolterstorff," in *Rational Faith, Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology* ed. Linda Zagzebski (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 101.

² *Ibid.*, 101. Meynell, while never accusing Plantinga of harboring sinister intentions, does point out a potential danger in Plantinga's refusal to allow arguments to settle the question of Christian truth-claims: "As the Scholastics used to say, whatever is

The New Testament and Evidentialism

These are the words of a Catholic writer, but they could have just as easily been penned by John Calvin, the father of Reformed theology and the primary inspiration for Plantinga's A/C model. Of course, Calvin thought that salvation was a matter of being called irrevocably by God (something Plantinga seems quite wary of asserting), but it is wrong to assert that evidential arguments possessed no weight for the Geneva Reformer. And here, of course, Calvin is simply following the evidentialist strain of the New Testament; the early church was built upon the fact of the resurrection, not the internal "feelings" produced by the Holy Spirit. In an important article entitled "'Not Done in a Corner': How to be a Sensible Evidentialist About Jesus," Steven K. Wykstra notes that evidentialism is certainly biblical, and there are many examples of its use in the NT. He cites as an example Acts 26: 19-26, where Paul, before King Agrippa and Festus, does not make an appeal to the inner workings of the Holy Spirit to defend his Christian faith, but rather to the evidence of "Moses and the prophets." He then insists that his testimony is "true and reasonable." Wykstra explains why Plantinga fails to make adequate use of such NT evidence: it is because he has been too deeply influenced by Dutch Calvinism, and "I fear Dutch Calvinism may be deeply flawed. In the passage quoted from Acts above, the apostle Paul is bold before King Agrippa because, he says, the events he proclaims were 'not done in a corner,' and so have not escaped the notice of Agrippa. The gospel thus makes claims upon Agrippa—claims to being both 'true and

affirmed gratuitously is denied gratuitously. Those who abandon resort to reasoning on the basis of evidence but all the same wish to convince others of what they believe—as of course all Christians are bound to do—will almost inevitably be led to indulge in more sinister means of persuasion, such as indoctrination or less subtle forms of coercion" (105).

reasonable’—because its historical components engage ordinary ways of knowing.”³

Wykstra further writes that “Paul, also, to be sure, appeals to the Spirit-inspired prophets, but he does this in synergy with appeal to our ordinary means of knowing.”⁴ If a model of Christian warrant is to preserve this synergy (as I believe it should), Dutch Calvinism may need to learn from Scottish Calvinism, [and] from Calvin himself.”⁵

Now, Wykstra is saying quite a lot here, all of which can be profitable for Plantinga’s A/C model. First, he appeals to our “ordinary ways of knowing,” that is, the usual manner in which we decide if something is true or not. If Dutch Calvinism rejects this approach with regard to faith, then Dutch Calvinism teeters on dangerously unbiblical grounds, something even Plantinga would not want to do; Christ’s miracles and of course his resurrection are offered up as proof by Jesus as well as the disciples that Christian truth-claims are indeed veridical ones. Second, what Wykstra is saying about the appeal to authority (in this case, Moses and the prophets) along with an appeal to reason is precisely the Roman Catholic position, and has been especially so since the days of Thomas Aquinas. Yet, ironically enough, Aquinas is half of the namesake for Plantinga’s A/C model, even though Plantinga rejects Aquinas-like appeals to reason.

Perhaps especially troubling for Plantinga is just how open Calvin, the primary influence on his A/C model, was to evidentialist arguments. In II Peter 1 16:-18, the

³ Steven J. Wykstra, “‘Not Done in A Corner’”: How to be a Sensible Evidentialist About Jesus,” *Philosophical Books* 43 (2002): 93.

⁴ Oddly enough, Plantinga counts Thomas Reid as one of his influences, yet does not seem to incorporate much of the Scottish thinker’s “common sense realism” into his own epistemology. For Reid, The world we perceive is the actual world (contra Plantinga), and we perceive things through normal, empirical means.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

author writes “we have not followed cunningly-devised fables when we made known to unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty.” Commenting on the Transfiguration, Calvin says “Three only were then present, but they were sufficient as witnesses, for they had through many miracles seen the glory of Christ, and had a remarkable *evidence* of his divinity in his resurrection” (italics mine).⁶ Commenting on Calvin’s handling of this passage, Wykstra writes that “the Christian’s certainty today regarding things of the gospel, on Calvin’s account here, rests in no small way upon historical events to which we have access by ordinary means of perceptual and testimonial faculties. This is not to say that for Calvin, the Holy Spirit plays no crucial role here. Indeed, Calvin immediately goes on to affirm the importance of the Spirit. His idea, however, is that these two sources are complimentary.”⁷ After looking at Calvin’s interpretation of other similar passages, Wykstra concludes that “[b]oth in Scripture and Calvin, it thus seems to me, we find suggestions that in a full account of Christian warrant, our ordinary faculties and the role of the Spirit need to be, not sundered, nor merely conjoined, but synergistically linked. Such linking is also implicit in Jesus’ own promise (John 14:26) to send the Holy Spirit to his disciples to ‘remind you of everything I have said to you,’ thus working in synergy with the ordinary cognitive faculty of the disciples’ memory.”⁸

⁶ John Calvin, quoted in Wykstra, “Not Done in a Corner,” 98.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 102

Aquinas and Evidentialism

If Plantinga has mistakenly interpreted Calvin's ready acceptance of evidence (and I think he has), I think it is equally likely that he has misconstrued the nature of evidentialist apologetics in general. Plantinga rejects evidentialism and natural theology because he does not think they can provide a "sure" foundation for faith. But this was never the point of evidentialist apologetics. It is well-known that St. Anselm, in formulating his ontological argument, was not attempting to "prove" beyond all doubt that God exists, but rather to supplement the faith of Christians with what he took to be a powerful argument in favor of the reality of God. And the same approach is found in that Catholic luminary John Henry Newman, writing centuries later, who said, "we do not deny our faith, because we become controversialists; and in like manner we may employ ourselves in proving what we already believe to be true, simply in order to obtain the producible evidence in its favor, and in order to fulfill what is due to ourselves and to the claims and responsibilities of our educational and social position."⁹

Even Aquinas, whom Plantinga uses as one of the twin pillars for his A/C model, realized the importance, though not the finality, of evidentialism:

Aquinas. . . gives an account of rational belief not envisaged by foundationalism. Christian faith is rational not because its truths are evident, nor because there is proportionate evidence for those truths, but because the evidence is sufficient to enable the heart to respond to God's invitation to believe what is not known. Given this alternative, Aquinas feels no compulsion to locate the knowledge of God in the noetic foundations in order to avoid holding that God's existence is uncertain in the absence of compelling proofs.¹⁰

⁹ John Henry Newman, *The Grammar of Assent* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1955), 159.

¹⁰ Joseph Boyle et al., "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology: A Catholic Perspective," *Christian Scholar's Review* 11 (1982): 209.

One can see from this passage how Plantinga might see a kindred soul in Aquinas, what with Thomas's ultimate distrust of "proofs." But then again, he does place some value on them, and here is the crucial difference between Aquinas and Plantinga. Aquinas thinks that arguments for God can "enable the heart to respond to God's invitation," whereas in Plantinga, we first believe because it is properly basic to do so, and only afterward does he allow arguments to enhance that properly basic belief. But of course, if one believes based on the instigation of the Holy Spirit, why allow any place for arguments at all?

This was not Aquinas's position:

Aquinas says that some of the basic claims of the Christian faith can be rationally demonstrated and therefore known, at least by some people, via such arguments as his own famous "five ways." Many important beliefs, though, including some about Jesus with historical content, are grasped only through faith. Faith is not mere conjecture, belief without evidence, or opinion, belief without conclusive evidence. For Aquinas, faith is basically believing a proposition on the basis of an authority. He says plainly that in order for such faith to be reasonable, and not foolish, one must have reasons for trusting the authority.¹¹

It is ironic that both Calvin and Aquinas seem willing to allow a greater role for reasoned apologetic than Plantinga does. But perhaps most ironic of all is that Plantinga, as a philosophical theologian, cannot do speculative philosophical theology (as he does so famously in *God, Freedom, and Evil*), unless he engages in some kind of exploration of evidentialism:

The Christian philosopher, for example, properly investigates questions concerning the divine attributes. Is God bound by space and time, or does He live a life that altogether transcends these measures? Does He change, or is He immutable? Does He not think one thing, then another; or are His thoughts present to Him all at once? Surely it cannot be wrong to wonder, wrong to philosophize about the nature of the highest object of thought. But to understand God's attributes better, it may well be necessary first to examine carefully the

¹¹ C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 233.

evidence for the very existence of a cause extrinsic to the entire universe. For the purpose of his discussion, Plantinga restricts natural theology to attempts to prove God's existence, but traditionally natural theology has been more broadly taken to include a study of the divine attributes. The studies are not unconnected. Unless, then, one wishes to say that theology broadly conceived is also illicit or that, though licit, is effectively persuadable without paying the slightest attention to arguments for a transcendent cause of the universe, natural theology has its rightful place as a study of the Christian philosopher.¹²

Indeed, if Plantinga is bent on restricting himself to what he considers to be primarily basic beliefs, that is, ones that do not require any underpinning from natural theology or other evidential arguments, his entire epistemological enterprise cannot even *begin*. This is because so much of Plantinga's A/C model is premised upon the Fall, and the ruinous effects it has had upon our noetic structures. But, as James Ross poignantly states, the

Fall presents a special problem for Reformed Epistemologists, namely, an epistemic circle. A properly functioning cognitive system is supposed to be able to produce belief in God not based on evidence, in accord with its original design. But in order to know the cognitive system is functioning according to its original design, one has to know that it is designed to yield belief in God without needing a propositional-evidential basis. Given the "darkening" of the intellect from the Fall of humankind, and even worse, the total depravity into which the Reformers believed human nature fell, how do we know about the proper function and design of the cognitive system? This is analogous to the Cartesian circle but made worse by the premise that because of the Fall, human cognitive systems do not function properly and even with grace (short of beatitude) are not restored to their original integrity. So how do these writers get access to the original design? Why should a properly functioning cognitive system produce belief in God without an evidential basis?¹³

So, Plantinga simply cannot avoid the necessity of engaging in at least some type of argument on behalf of Christianity. And of course, this is precisely what *Warranted Christian Belief* is—an argument in favor of the intellectual truth of Christianity, albeit

¹² Boyle, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," 205.

¹³ James Ross, "Cognitive Finality," in *Rational Faith*, 229-30.

not a traditional evidentialist argument. Still, Plantinga does admit in his preface to the work that he is engaged in apologetics. But, his argument lacks evidentialist rigor.

Non-Contradiction and Rival Religious Truth-Claims

I certainly do not have the space here to engage in a full-blown attempt to adjudicate between Christian and non-Christian truth claims. Instead, I wish to cite only a few examples of how the insistence upon non-contradiction that Plantinga makes the centerpiece of his free will defense can be equally well-used when attempting to decide which world religion is speaking truly on a given topic. Note that none of this involves for a moment abandoning Plantinga's idea that faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It has certainly been considered to be just that throughout Christian history. But, Plantinga's position that faith is "properly basic," that it stands alone with buttresses from other areas of knowledge, is clearly insufficient.

This was not this position of the NT writers, nor was it the position of Aquinas and Calvin. And while Plantinga rightly rejects the idea that we can "prove" Christianity is true (proof of anything is usually not possible, outside the realm of mathematics and formal logic), his utter failure to take seriously the implication of his A/C model for other theistic faiths means his system is susceptible to the following problems: 1) there is no way to adjudicate between rival religious truth-claims; 2) the Christian has no way to increase his or her faith through intellectual means, say, in the way in which St. Anselm did with his ontological argument; and 3) the A/C model is seemingly useless for any kind of evangelistic work. In fact, coming to mature Christian faith is almost always far more complicated than simply accepting properly basic beliefs about God. And while Plantinga admits that there are other factors that influence the development of Christian

faith, such an upbringing, Bible reading, etc., again the question must be asked: Why are such things even necessary, if faith is a matter of the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit? Plantinga, it seems, wishes to have his epistemological cake and eat it as well.

For example, let us take the crucifixion of Jesus as presented in the Christian scriptures, and in the Muslim scriptures. The New Testament, of course, claims that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and that he rose again in three days. The Koran claims that Jesus was not crucified, but rather, that someone who looked like Jesus was crucified (a similar distortion is told in certain second-century Gnostic gospels). This of course rules out the resurrection, since Jesus did not die in the first place. Now, the question of the resurrection, and the evidence for it, while substantial,¹⁴ does not concern me here. I simply want to state how, using the criterion on non-contradiction (something cannot be A and non-A at the same time), it is a simple matter to show that both the canonical gospels and the Koran cannot be correct on this point.

Yet, for reasons he never explains, Plantinga does not delve into this kind of argument when trying to establish his case for warranted Christian faith. Note that this type of argument is not trying to “prove” that Jesus is divine, or even that he rose from the dead in a corporeal body. All this argument wants to show is that the foundational documents of two of the great religions contradict each other, and therefore cannot both be correct. And, this is no peripheral issue. If Christ did die on the cross, then the Koran is mistaken on this point. One could even go as far as to say that Muhammad intentionally changed the gospel accounts because he found the idea of substitutionary

¹⁴ See, for example, N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003), or Stephen T. Davis, *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1993). Also see the many works by William Lane Craig and Gary Habermas on the topic.

atonement offensive to his understanding of the individual's responsibility for his own sins before God. Conversely, if Jesus was not crucified, as the NT insists, then Christianity is *certainly*, not probably, false. No amount of Plantingian sophistry could change this fact. I know of no non-Muslim historian who denies that a man named Jesus was crucified by the Romans around 30 AD in Palestine. There simply is no reason to take the Koranic version of the story all that seriously. For one thing, we have extra-biblical evidence that Jesus was in fact crucified. The event is mentioned by the Jewish historian Josephus, as well as the Roman writer Tacitus. For another, the Koranic version of the crucifixion was penned centuries after the biblical one, and it is commonplace among scholars to accept accounts found in earlier documents over similar versions found in later ones. Hence scholarly preference for the *Epic of Gilgamesh* over the later flood story in Genesis, or the priority of Paul and the gospels (first century) over Gnostic gospel distortions (second century and later).

None of this could “prove” that Christianity is true, and Islam false, but an historical approach of this type would at least enable Plantinga to claim that perhaps the Christian has a firmer foundation for warranted faith than does the Muslim. After all, if the Koran is wrong about such an important piece of history, perhaps talk of a “warranted” faith flowing from the Muslim holy book is lacking as well. Again, I am not violating the tenets of Plantinga’s A/C model at all here, for even he admits that not all religions can be true; in fact, he often stresses that non-Christian faiths are probably not true, because they do not possess the same kind of warrant that Christianity does. But, as I pointed out in an earlier chapter, it simply will not do to say that Christianity has the only “system” in which something like the A/C model can be used. One *must* resort to

some kind of evidential argument. And, one can use the type of comparison explained above while all the while realizing that it is only evidence, not proof, and that the faith imparted to Christians by the Holy Spirit bolsters the available evidence.

Another example of this type of historical argument can be found when Christianity is compared with Mormonism. Adherents of both religions claim inspiration from God (from the same God, no less!). But, an evidentialist might challenge the claims that are made in the Book of Mormon. Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon faith, claims to have translated the Mormon scriptures from a language he called “Reformed Egyptian.” Now, the only problem is that scholars know of no such language; it never existed, based on the opinion of “every leading Egyptologist and philologist ever consulted on the problem.”¹⁵ But what is recounted in the Book of Mormon is equally troubling. The Book tells the story of two ancient civilizations that left the Middle East centuries before the time of Christ. One group is said to have settled on the west coast of South America, while the other group settled the east coast of what is now Central America. The Book goes on to describe how these two groups of persons established thirty-eight great cities in the New World. Obviously, the problem is that no one outside of Mormonism believes that any ancient immigrants ever left the Middle East and established great cities in Central and South America. Why? Because there is absolutely no proof that this occurred: “Mormons have yet to explain the fact that leading archaeological researchers not only have repudiated the claims of the *Book of Mormon* as

¹⁵ Walter Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1970), 172 (footnote 11).

to the existence of these civilizations, but have adduced considerable evidence to show the impossibility of the accounts given in the Mormon Bible.”¹⁶

So, an evidentialist apologist need not spend his or her time wondering about whether or not Mormonism meets the claims of “properly basic” belief. Such speculation is rendered moot by the fact that there seems to be no historical basis for this religion. Evidence (or, in this case, the lack thereof), should give a potential convert serious pause before embracing this faith. Even if the would-be convert was impressed with the piety he saw among members of the Mormon community,¹⁷ how important would that be to him, if he knew that the religion had no grounding in verifiable history?

¹⁶ Ibid., 183. For a thorough refutation of the alleged historical basis of the *Book of Mormon*, see pages 178–87. There are, of course, many passages in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, that are of dubious historical character. But at the same time, much of the biblical record has been confirmed by historians and archaeologists. One can safely say that there is a basic historicity to the Bible, even if a “fundamentalist” interpretation does not seem tenable. But, with the *Book of Mormon*, there is not even one event therein described that can claim historical plausibility.

¹⁷ I have known several Mormons personally, and I have always been impressed with their deep faith and the manner in which that faith issues in Godly living. Mormons therefore would probably feel fully justified in claiming some type of Holy Spirit-inspired warrant for their faith. If their lives are as holy, or more so, than the lives of many orthodox Christians, how would a Reformed epistemologist account for this, given the fact that Mormonism and Christianity are two very different religions? They cannot both be right, even though they both seem to produce the same fruits.

Richard Swinburne and Competing Religious Truth-Claims

Richard Swinburne, who along with Plantinga comprises the short list of the greatest living Christian philosophers, would understand that Mormonism seems to contain within it the seeds of its own undoing, for he is far more open to assessing objective evidence than is Plantinga. To examine Swinburne's work on the incarnation and the resurrection as evidence of the truth of the Christian revelation would be an entire dissertation in itself, and the interested reader may consult his works on the subject.¹⁸ Swinburne is not antagonistic to Plantinga's notion of warranted belief, but he knows that it cannot stand alone. Thus, when examining the great world religions, Swinburne establishes some criteria that could be used to help us adjudicate between rival, contradictory truth-claims. For instance, he says, most world religions have their start with a founder, or prophet. Concerning all such prophets, Swinburne says, his "teaching on morality, for example, must not involve his telling men that they ought to do what is evidently morally wrong—the prophet who commends cheating and child torture can be dismissed straight away. Likewise no factual teaching must be provably false."¹⁹ Now, continuing with my Christianity/Islam comparison, how does such a statement work when applied to the two faiths? When Christ seems to be predicting the end of the world within one generation, this poses a problem, and has led many liberal Christian scholars in the tradition of Albert Schweitzer to simply assume Jesus was wrong on this point. More conservative scholars suggest alternate explanations for Christ's predictions of impending doom; perhaps he was only referring to the coming destruction of Jerusalem,

¹⁸ See his *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003). Also of interest is his *The Existence of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁹ Richard Swinburne, *Revelation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 86.

for instance. Regarding Islam, I mentioned above how the Koran teaches that Christ was not crucified. Now, it could be that Muhammad wrote the truth here; perhaps the Christian version of the crucifixion is false. But given the fact that so many Christian, as well as secular, historians accept the crucifixion of Jesus as having a basis in fact, it is not hard to doubt Muhammad's account.

And, if Muhammad was wrong about this, it is certainly possible that he was wrong about other things as well. For instance, there are passages in which he teaches that war against unbelievers is a duty incumbent upon Muslims, and that disobedient wives can be beaten (only as a last resort, when other modes of discipline have failed). Of course, there are passages in the Bible that are militaristic in nature, and there are passages in both Testaments that relegate women to second class status. But, such passages do not come from Christ, whereas the morally objectionable portions of the Koran are assumed to have come from Muhammad himself. In fact, Muhammad was only the messenger; anything he wrote (or had someone else write, assuming he was illiterate, as Muslims claim) was directly revealed to him by Allah. Now, whether Jesus or Muhammad is the better moral teacher is debatable, but I simply want to point out, contra Plantinga, that there *is* a debate to be had.²⁰ Swinburne is thus correct when he writes that:

²⁰ Aquinas himself partook of this debate. "Aquinas scores Muhammad for a failure 'to bring forth any signs produced in a supernatural way, which alone fittingly gives witness to divine inspiration; for a visible action that can be only divine reveals an invisibly inspired teacher of truth.' In contrast to Christianity, Aquinas says that Muhammad produced converts through force of arms, and by propounding doctrines that humans are eager to believe anyway." Quoted from C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith*, 234-35. Evans goes on to state that Aquinas was not an expert on Islam, and his interpretation of what Muhammad taught may not always be the most accurate, but "he understood the need for rational grounds for choosing between

evidence for and against the truth of the prophet's teaching must be weighed in the same way as evidence for and against the truth of any other body of claims, be it the story told by a witness in a criminal trial, or a scientific or historical theory. But in this case [i.e., that of testing the claims of religious prophets]. . . any falsity at all is enough to dismiss the whole; earthly witnesses in a criminal trial can make a few mistakes without their testimony as a whole being regarded as worthless, but a prophet purporting to have a message from God must be assessed by more stringent standards.²¹

But this type of adjudication is something Plantinga does not even address, relying as he does upon the fideistic A/C model he has developed. But certainly a much better approach would be to assume the truth of Christianity (we can even grant Plantinga his assurance of the Holy Spirit here), but then use our God-given reason to try to come to terms with problematic passages in the NT, like Christ's prediction about the end of time, while simultaneously pointing out that Muhammad seems to be an unlikely messenger of God indeed, based on the morally dubious nature of much of what he taught in the Koran. Thus, when both the Christian and the Muslim claim that their faith is warranted, grounds for deciding the matter at least exist, even if they cannot always settle

rival claimants to be revelations from God. He also gives plausible criteria for making such a choice, as can be seen in that they cut against certain versions of Christianity as well" (235, footnote 6).

²¹ Ibid., 88. Oddly enough, Swinburne takes an ambiguous position on the historical reliability of the Jewish scriptures. He writes, "the various 'miracles' recorded in the Old Testament may well have occurred as described and be violations of natural laws, but the evidence for this is vastly inferior to the evidence about the Resurrection, even if the latter is not thought to be strong" (quoted from Swinburne's *Faith and Reason*, 252). C. Stephen Evans says of Swinburne that "Judaism and Islam. . . are not 'serious candidates,' according to Swinburne, because they do not claim that their revelations are authenticated by a major miracle, which is, according to Swinburne, a crucial test of such a revelation" (quoted from Evans' *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith*, 237). The problem here is that, to question Judaism is to undermine, at least in part, the Christian revelation, which is based largely upon the Jewish revelation! Perhaps this shows that evidentialism has its limits, and sometimes can actually be a detriment to Christian belief.

the issue to the satisfaction of an outside observer. But even this is far superior to Plantinga's A/C model, which provides *no* objective basis for comparing and contrasting different faiths.

So far this discussion assumes Swinburne's understanding of the word "God" that describes an all-loving, all-good Being who wants what is best for us (and few religious persons, at least in the West, would squabble with this understanding of God.²² Even in the less monotheistically inclined East, the idea that the divine is a source of love and beneficence is commonplace). Furthermore, if God is like this, it stands to reason that He would want to make himself known to us, rather than to permit us to fumble in moral and theological darkness. But Swinburne correctly points out that certain eastern religions make the issue of divine revelation quite problematic, for these religions are not based on a revelation of God at all. Rather, their credibility comes from the fact that they have "been found by wise men in some sense to 'work.'"²³ These Eastern religions are, Swinburne implies, on a somewhat different level of plausibility when it comes to the question of their being divinely inspired, since, for instance, neither the Buddha, Confucius, nor Lao Tzung made any claim to receiving revelation from God or gods. Even Hinduism, which is sometimes conceived of as monotheistic, sometimes as polytheistic, is not a revelational faith in anything like the Christian or Islamic understating:

Hinduism often claims that God has become incarnate on various occasions, and revealed certain things about the divine nature and the goodness of certain ways

²² See chapter 5 of Swinburne's *Revelation* for more on his belief that God's self-disclosure necessarily flows out of his goodness and love.

²³ *Ibid.*, 95.

of conduct. But the grounds for believing those things, for instance the message of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, are not that this is a revelation. Rather the process of inference must go the other way round. The message seems on other grounds to be true, and that is some reason for supposing that it comes from God. My grounds for saying that the process of inference “must” go the other way round are that Hinduism makes no detailed claim to evidence of revelation other than the content of the message, no appeal to particular historical facts concerning its promulgation which might authenticate its message. And the content of the message concerns not any particular future acts of God but general truths of a kind on which wise human thinkers might stumble.²⁴

Swinburne’s point is not that Eastern faiths are “wrong” because they do not claim to be based on divine revelation, but rather that they have less chance of being true, since even their boldest adherents do not claim that their faiths were founded by divinely inspired persons. Plantinga’s A/C model would surely benefit from this type of approach to the non-theistic faiths. For although Plantinga tends to dismiss them as of little account, he does not tell us *why*.

To return to Islam again briefly, Swinburne says that it stands in contrast with the Eastern faiths, for it does indeed claim that its founder was the recipient of divine inspiration. But, Swinburne insists, there is no proof that Muhammad was the inspired prophet his followers claim. In fact, when asked to perform a miracle by skeptics, Muhammad told them that the Koran itself was the only miracle that was required. That book is often thought to be miraculous in nature because, Muslims claim, it is impossible that an unlettered man like Muhammad could produce a work of such profundity on his own. Also, many readers of Arabic say that the Koran displays a level of poetic beauty matched by no other work in that language. Against this, Swinburne writes that “we have no plausible cases of natural laws which the success of the Quran, things known to an illiterate, or the production of a new style of writing might seem to violate. We have no

²⁴ Ibid., 95-96.

reason to suspect that illiterate creative genius cannot guess at truths normally accessible only to the literate, or create a new style or a successful movement. So there is no strong reason to suppose that natural law has been violated.”²⁵ Here Swinburne assumes divine revelation to be a violation of natural law. Yet Plantinga, for all his prodigious output, never addresses questions like these, even though, as pointed out earlier in this dissertation, a Muslim could just as easily use the A/C model as could a Christian. In fact, it has already been done by several Islamic scholars.²⁶

Swinburne asserts that it is only Christianity that satisfies all of the following criteria, thus establishing it on firmer grounds in terms of probable truth: it claims to be based on divine revelation; it claims its central Figure fulfills prophecy made prior to the time of Christ; and it is based upon a stupendous miracle, the resurrection of Christ as an actual event in history, as opposed to the ahistorical Hindu scriptures, and the miracle-free life of Islam’s founder. But, Swinburne is not in any sense a “fundamentalist.” In fact, although he bases much of his argument for Christian truth on the belief that the life of Christ fulfilled many OT predictions, he does not assume a literal, inerrantist approach to this matter. Regarding the messianic prophecies, it is not necessary to take their fulfillment by Christ in a wooden, literalistic way, Swinburne asserts, because “in a more general sense of ‘fulfill’ there is plenty of independent reason for saying that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament—he provided what so many of the writers of the Old

²⁵ Ibid., 97.

²⁶ See, for instance, *Maulana Muhammad Ali, The Religion of Islam: A Comprehensive Discussion of the Sources, Principles, and Practices of Islam* (Columbus, OH: Amadiyya Anjuman Isha’at Islam, 1990), and Bakhitar Husain Siddiqui, *Knowledge: An Islamic Perspective* (Washington, DC: Publications of the Council for Research and Values in Philosophy, 1998).

Testament inchoately longed for: deep prophecy, true revelation from God, true incarnation from God, true sacrifice for sin.”²⁷ Again, this fits in nicely with Plantinga's own view of scripture, revealed in one of his most recently published articles. There, he admits that he is not a “fundamentalist,” and that common sense must sometimes be used to determine which Bible stories to take literally rather than symbolically.²⁸

Swinburne sees the literal, historical resurrection of Christ from the dead as supplying something that other world religions lack; a founder whose claims to supernatural wisdom are actually buttressed by an event for which there is good historical evidence. I will not delve into the evidence (not proof!) for the resurrection here, as Swinburne does a fine job of it in his aforementioned book *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*. That the evidence is strong is indicated by the broad spectrum of scholars who believe that the resurrection was an actual event in history. Timothy McGrew, commenting on Plantinga's inexplicable lack of interest in Christ's resurrection as an historical event, writes, “Plantinga, who finds time to mention Morton Smith's suggestion that Jesus was a homosexual magician, does not cite, even in a footnote, any of the theologians or biblical scholars who advocate the historical argument [in favor of the resurrection].”²⁹ McGrew goes on to note that those who take the resurrection as a verifiable event include those “whose scholarly abilities and breadth of historical knowledge cannot be impugned, names like Richard Whatley, B. B. Warfield, F. F. Bruce,

²⁷ Swinburne, *Revelation*, 116.

²⁸ Alvin Plantinga, “Internalism, Externalism, Defeaters and Arguments for Christian Belief,” *Philosophia Christi* 2 (2001): 388-89.

²⁹ Timothy McGrew, “Has Plantinga Refuted the Historical Argument?” *Philosophia Christi* 6 (2004): 21.

John Warwick Montgomery, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Craig Blomberg, Gary Habermas, William Lane Craig and N. T. Wright.”³⁰ Yet all Plantinga has to say about the resurrection is that

[e]ven if you had a fine command of the vast literature and thought there *was* rather a good historical case here, you would presumably think it pretty speculative and chancy. I’d guess that it is likely that the disciples *believed* that Jesus arose from the dead, but on sheerly historical grounds (together with the assumption that there really is such a person as God, who is rather likely to make a revelation to us) it is considerably less likely that this actually did happen. Given all the controversy among the experts, we should probably declare this probability inscrutable—that is, we can’t really say with any confidence what it is.³¹

There are several odd things about this passage. One, if disagreement among the “experts” is our criterion, then virtually no story in the Bible, and almost no Christian doctrine, should be accepted, for no portion of the faith has escaped at least someone’s critical scrutiny since the dawn of modern biblical scholarship. In fact, Plantinga himself knows this all too well, and has mocked the extent to which skeptical critics mishandle scripture.³² Two, I am not sure what to make of Plantinga’s claim that the chances of the resurrection actually having happened are “inscrutable.” The event either happened or it did not and it, like any alleged historical event, must be investigated accordingly.³³ As

³⁰ Ibid, 21 (footnote 28).

³¹ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 276.

³² Alvin Plantinga, “Sheehans’s Shenanigans: How Theology Becomes Tomfoolery,” in *The Analytic Theist*, 316-327.

³³ It has always been stressed by theologian and apologist John Warwick Montgomery that the evidence for the resurrection of Christ can be looked at objectively, historically, without any pro-Christian or anti-Christian biases. He may overstate the case, since our presuppositions often play a role in what we determine to be true, but he is

Swinburne notes, evaluating “different evidence and different kinds of evidence against each other is always a delicate and difficult matter, but it is something that historians and scientists have to do all the time, and the situation in this regard in theology is no different in principle, only in scale, from what it is in science and history.”³⁴ Since the resurrection is the central event of Christian history, Plantinga at the very least should make the effort to weigh the evidence for and against this event. Swinburne believes the evidence is quite high that the biblical accounts of the resurrection are literally true; others who have investigated the matter sharply disagree.³⁵ But to ignore the matter as Plantinga basically does simply is not faithful to the Christian tradition, which has usually reserved an honored place for resurrection apologetics. Three, even if the resurrection is improbable, as Plantinga seems to think it appears to those outside Christianity, what then can we make of his recourse to Satan and demonic hordes in his free will defense? Recall that the possible existence of malevolent beings is posited by Plantinga to explain natural evil, that is, evil that cannot be accounted for by the misuse of human free will. Plantinga’s refusal to permit the resurrection to serve as an apologetic device is strange indeed, considering that most Bible scholars would say that it is far better attested than the existence of demons!

probably right that the resurrection should be viewed as any other alleged event in history. The question should then be asked; did it really happen? Is there any evidence for it?

³⁴ Swinburne, *Revelation*, 219.

³⁵ See, for instance, Robert M. Price and Jeffrey J. Lowder eds., *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 2005). Not only does Plantinga not wrestle with the cogent arguments against the reliability of the resurrection narratives presented in this work, I know of no New Testament scholars who have directly addressed the essays in this book, either.

Plantinga has criticized Swinburne for his apologetic technique concerning the resurrection, which Plantinga considers to be an argument based on “dwindling probabilities.” In other words, there are too many steps involved in Swinburne’s apologetic. First one must assume there is a God; then one must assume this God has revealed Himself; then it must be believed that he revealed Himself uniquely in Jesus; then one must believe that God has raised this Jesus from the dead, and so forth. Plantinga writes that, “[s]uppose you *were* completely convinced, on merely historical grounds, that Jesus rose from the dead: wouldn’t it be an enormous further step to conclude. . . that he was, in fact, the divine and unique son of God the second person of the trinity, and that his suffering and death is a propitiatory sacrifice, whereby we can have eternal life?”³⁶ Plantinga surely has a point here; Christian orthodox doctrine about Jesus is not necessarily true even if the resurrection occurred as the Bible relates. Still, if Jesus did conquer death, this is an unprecedented, miraculous event, and it certainly *might* mean that God has raised from the dead (after all, how else to account for such an utter impossibility as a man returning from the grave after three days?). The resurrection argument, as employed by Swinburne and others, does not amount to proof that Christianity is undoubtedly true, but only as evidence that it might be, or probably is, true. This is exactly the same kind of approach Plantinga employs in his free will defense; he aims for probability, not certainty, so there seems to be little point in Plantinga’s castigating Swinburne for using the same type of argument from probability that he does! And, let’s not forget that Plantinga’s free will defense can be subjected to precisely the same kind of “dwindling probability” critique that Swinburne’s can!

³⁶ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 277.

Another example of a way in which the religious playing field could be winnowed, in Swinburnian fashion, is provided by sociologist of religion Rodney Stark. Stark is not an epistemologist, of course, but his most recent book enunciates a method of religious adjudication similar to Swinburne's in that it allows for some criteria when judging the truth or falsity of the world's great religions. Like Swinburne, Stark begins with a few basic presuppositions, namely that something like the God of the Western monotheistic tradition exists, and that this God has been active in revealing himself to humanity down through the ages. This is not troubling for someone in the Plantingian school, for Plantinga assumes at least that much with his notion of warranted Christian belief. Indeed, the A/C model would not be viable at all if Plantinga did not take for granted the reality of the kind of God he believes inspires basic belief in His followers. Roughly put, Stark takes the position that God has been revealing himself in various ways throughout human history, and that the revelation began with primitive peoples, who still retain a vestige of this revelation in their notions of the "high god," a remote, deistic sort of god who has relegated control of the universe to lesser, multiple deities.³⁷ I am not aware that Stark has addressed Plantinga in any of his works, but I imagine that, given Stark's belief that God has been actively disclosing himself through human history, he would not be adverse to the idea that God has implanted a properly basic understanding of Himself in the human mind. In fact, Stark's latest book almost presupposes such an idea. He writes that:

³⁷ Rodney Stark, *Discovering God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 21-63.

The principle of divine accommodation³⁸ teaches that God reveals himself within the current limits of the human capacity to comprehend. Applied to the materials at hand, that means that over the course of history, God's revelations should progress from the simple to the more complex. Hence, we should not discover that some Stone Age tribes had full knowledge of the Mosaic Law. Nor should later conceptions of God be less complex than earlier ones; when the Israelites turned from Yahweh to Baal, Astarte, Molech, and Asherah, this did not reflect divine inspiration.³⁹

Stark is equally dismissive of pagan religion outside of Israel. Assuming that monotheism was God's original revelation, Stark writes that the "subsequent rise of polytheistic temple religions was regressive—the religions of Sumer, Egypt, Greece, early Rome, and Mesoamerica have no place within the progressive core of inspired faiths."⁴⁰ Stark may be surprisingly bold here, but such a negative pronouncement upon so much of the world's ancient religious history surely would find a home within Plantinga's conservative epistemology that would necessarily rule out such faiths as inauthentic.

Like Swinburne, Stark has a rather mixed verdict when it comes to Judaism. He grants that the Jews introduced monotheism and other related concepts, but wonders how much the Jews took from Zoroastrianism during their exile in Babylonia. Still, he grants that Judaism must be a veridical faith, comprised of largely genuine revelations (whether

³⁸ The idea of God accommodating Himself to human thinking did not begin with modern biblical criticism. In fact, both Aquinas and Calvin took this approach, at least to some extent. Calvin thought that God accommodated himself to human limitations in the creation story in Genesis. And Aquinas wrote that the "things of God should be revealed to mankind only in proportion to their capacity; otherwise, they might despise what was beyond their grasp. . . . It was, therefore, better for the divine mysteries to be conveyed to an uncultured people as it were veiled. . . ." (quoted from Stark, *Discovering God*, 7).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 393.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 393.

revealed to the Jewish prophets or taken over from Zoroaster, who himself, Stark seems to think, was among the long line of genuine prophets in the history of God's dealings with humankind). When it comes to Islam, Stark, again like Swinburne, finds the lack of miracles in Muhammad's career to be problematic for his claim to be God's ultimate messenger. But, beyond that, Stark thinks, based on his criteria that God's revelation is *progressive*, he can state that Islam is not a veridical revelation from the Lord:

Perhaps the best way to resolve the matter is to ask whether Islam is progressive or regressive *vis a vis* our understanding of God. It is quite unnecessary to doubt Muhammad's sincerity to conclude that the faith revealed in the Qu'ran, having originated centuries after the other great monotheisms, is morally and theologically regressive. In sustaining theocracies and by repressing innovations, Islam resembles the temple religions of the ancient civilizations. As for discovering God, the prevailing conceptions of Allah present him as so unpredictable and unknowable that it may not even be assumed that he is rational or virtuous, which has pretty much prevented the development of an Islamic theology—it is futile to reason about the unreasonable.⁴¹

Stark's verdict is politically incorrect, but my point here is only to point out again that there are criteria that can be used to evaluate the probability of a religion's truth-claims. Provided, of course, that one accepts, as do Plantinga and Stark, that the monotheistic conception of God can be taken as a "given." Plantinga seems to reject such approaches because they do not offer certitude, but his understanding of faith as properly basic offers no certitude, either, except in the mind of the individual believer, and this is of little value from an objective point of view. That is because one's "*psychological* certitude that God is speaking to her in that 'creedal specific' way is not the same thing as being *epistemically* certain of that proposition. The mere fact that she is *psychologically certain* that her model is true gives her no *epistemic* reason for thinking that she accepts the

⁴¹ Stark, *Discovering God*, 395.

correct extension of the standard A/C model. According to Plantinga's epistemology, our design plan is not aimed at psychological certainty but *truth*.”⁴²

The type of reasoning about the religions employed by Swinburne and Stark is necessary, for, as Karl Popper pointed out, what cannot be falsified cannot be shown to be true, either.⁴³ And while religion is not science, there is no reason to treat religious beliefs as if they are purely a matter of personal preference. After all, even Plantinga admits that certain types of beliefs are just plain silly and wrong (e.g., flat earthism, belief in the Great Pumpkin, etc.). Plantinga, in fact, thinks his free will defense is successful precisely because he has formulated it in such a way that it is open to falsification, but does not succumb to it. Yet when it comes to the issue of warranted Christian belief, Plantinga has abandoned the sound logic displayed in his free will defense, and has created an epistemic system that is immune to any objective attack because, as noted above, it is purely subjective. Here Plantinga is at least in good company, for both “Karl Barth and Paul Tillich [insulated] the doctrines which they promulgated from conceivable falsification, especially by historical arguments.”⁴⁴ But, it is doubtful that Plantinga would want to claim such theologians as influences, given his general distrust of theological liberalism. The faith that Plantinga says is produced by the Holy Spirit, in the A/C model, must be susceptible to falsification, or else it could very well be nothing

⁴² Erik Baldwin, “Could the Extended Aquinas/Calvin Model Defeat Basic Belief?” *Philosophia Christi* 8 (2006): 394.

⁴³ Hugo A. Meynell applies Popperian insights to the issue of Christian truth-claims in his “Faith, Objectivity, and Historical Falsifiability,” in *Language, Meaning, and God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1987), 145-61. See also Karl Popper, *Objective Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 52-60, 101-103.

⁴⁴ Meynell, “Faith, Objectivity, and Historical Falsifiability,” 146. See also W. W. Bartley, *The Retreat to Commitment* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962).

more than a figment of the believer's mind. Hugo Meynell sums up the problem as follows:

It is indeed logically possible that objective historical investigation could converge on the proposition that Jesus was not at all the kind of person that traditional Christians have proposed him to be—but rather perhaps the politically motivated trickster alleged by H. S. Reimarus in the eighteenth century, or the polymorphously-perverse conjuror who seems to emerge from the work of Morton Smith. To conclude the matter—that faith cannot literally be proved by historical inquiry does not necessarily imply that it cannot be falsified, or alternatively corroborated by it; and if faith cannot be thus corroborated, and hence might not conceivably be falsified, its claim to be essentially dependent on the existence of an historical person (such as Jesus) must be illusory.⁴⁵

Plantinga would seem obliged to agree with this statement, for two reasons. One, his essay critical of radical biblical criticism must mean that he thinks the biblical accounts of the Jesus story are basically reliable. And two, he sometimes admits that Christianity could be falsified, if certain documents were found that proved Christianity to be a fraud. So it seems that Plantinga's Christianity is indeed based, at least somewhat, on historical facts, and not just on Spirit-induced properly basic faith. Yet Plantinga will never follow the inevitable outcome of his position, namely, that faith cannot stand alone without being supplemented by objective evidence and arguments.

What Constitutes a Warranted Christian Belief?

Above, I listed some arguments in favor accepting Christianity as more probably true than other faiths. But the obverse also obtains. Plantinga must be willing to admit that certain positions simply are not tenable for a 21st-century Christian to maintain. For example (and this especially holds true if we accept the maxim derived from Plantinga's free will defense, i.e., that any argument that is contradicted by established evidence must

⁴⁵ Ibid., 148.

be ruled out), shouldn't Plantinga at least try to establish guidelines, based on various criteria (e.g., modern science, current biblical scholarship, and so forth) regulating what constitutes properly basic Christian belief? For example, it is most unlikely that the world is only six to ten thousand years old, as certain Christians interpret the Book of Genesis. But of course, along the Plantingian model, anyone who "feels" that a young age for the earth is true can claim that the Holy Spirit has revealed it him. This puts Plantinga in the awkward position of claiming that God assures believers that things are true when we have overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Mark Twain's humorous description of religious faith comes to mind: "faith is when you believe something you know ain't so." And there are others areas that would cause problems for Plantinga, such as Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, the early vs. late date for the Book of Daniel, etc. The Christian fundamentalist would insist that the conservative view on these issues is the only truly Christian one—Plantinga might reply that only the so-called "great things of the gospel" are covered by his A/C model. But the fundamentalist will insist that, for instance, if the Bible is wrong about when Daniel was written, how can it be trusted to tell us the truth about Jesus (whose life, death and resurrection Plantinga would surely count as among the gospel's great things?).

Granted, Plantinga is not a biblical scholar, so it should not be incumbent upon him to settle such vexing matters of biblical authorship and dating, but he needs at the very least to establish some kind of criteria for deciding what counts as properly basic belief. But he cannot do that, because his epistemology is utterly subjective, and cannot be supported, or defeated, by any appeal to history or science! Perhaps Plantinga would insist that only matters that pertain to our salvation are to be considered as revealed by

the Holy Spirit in his A/C model. In other words, only things like Christ's divinity, his atoning death on the cross, the trinity, and so forth, could be taken as properly basic. But again, the same problems would present themselves—how does one know that the NT is sufficiently reliable to establish even these things? Evans notes, even “if the Holy Spirit is guiding the process by which the evidence is interpreted and assessed, one can imagine situations where the evidence accessible to an individual will either be insufficient for faith or positively count against faith.”⁴⁶

In fact, just a brief examination of how some of the past century's best-known Christians came to faith is instructive. The case of C. S. Lewis is especially helpful. “Born in 1898, Lewis was raised a Christian but fell into agnosticism in his teens and twenties. By 1929, however, through extensive research, Lewis came to accept the Christian worldview, although he continued to reject Christianity. For the next couple of years he studied the claims of Christianity closely and specifically the life of Jesus and the historicity of the gospels. His famously reluctant conclusion was that he was ‘nearly certain that it really happened.’”⁴⁷ Plantinga is willing to grant that the Holy Spirit may act incrementally, rather than producing a sudden, firm conviction that Christianity is

⁴⁶ Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith*, 307.

⁴⁷ Beilby, *Epistemology as Theology*, 195. Similar examples could be cited, including that of Josh McDowell, the well-known evangelist and writer of popular apologetics, and that of John Warwick Montgomery. Both men came to faith only as adults, and only after wrestling with the evidence that Christianity was true (or, at least probably true). Conversely, one lifelong Christian scholar, Gerd Ludemann, abandoned his faith after coming to realize that his critical study of Christianity had so shaken his faith that he could no longer call himself a believer. See his *The Resurrection of Christ: A Historical Inquiry* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 2004).

true.⁴⁸ But then, even “if there is a final moment in which via the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit faith is created in the individual and at that moment the great things of the gospel seem utterly compelling, how can this new conviction be completely divorced (epistemically speaking) from one’s previous reflection the matter?”⁴⁹ Again, the previously mentioned problem arises; if Christian faith is the work of the Spirit, why doesn’t it occur immediately? Why does it often take years to manifest itself, as in the case of Lewis? And, more importantly, why does it so often lead to a weak faith or, as in Lewis’s case, a strong faith, yet one grounded in what Lewis admitted was only probable evidence? Plantinga claims that his model, under influence of the Holy Spirit, provides *certain* faith. But in reality, certitude in matters of faith is not a live option. Plantinga is correct, the Holy Spirit does indeed convince us that Christianity is true, but for most of us, it is never something we undoubtedly know. Evans well sums up the matter when he writes, “I see no reason to insist that the Holy Spirit must operate by way of evidence, I also see no reason to rule out such a case.”⁵⁰ Thus, Plantinga’s A/C model seems insufficient even for someone like Lewis, reared in a Christian home.

If Plantinga’s model does not seem applicable to someone like Lewis, who was reared in a atmosphere imbued with Christianity, it would fare even worse in terms of its appeal to non-Christians, for it would simply consign those who are not Christians to the realm of the spiritually unfortunate whose epistemological framework is not blessed by the instigation of the Holy Spirit. And a Christian epistemology that is only useful for

⁴⁸ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 161.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁵⁰ Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith*, 286.

those who are already Christian is not compatible with the spirit of Jonathan Edward's phrase, the "great things of the gospel," for surely one of those great things involves the sharing of the good news of Jesus. If an epistemology is only convincing to those who are already convinced, its validity must be seriously questioned. Joseph Boyle's comments provide fitting commentary:

If the convinced Christian breathing in from birth the atmosphere of a community of believers is blessed with knowledge of God's existence, still many others are not so fortunate. Might one less happily circumstanced be permitted to consider and to weigh the evidence? Might there not be people who, given our fallen state and an environment hostile to belief, look into the mirror of the universe and see little or nothing at all? Or at least nothing transcendent? People have looked up to the sun and the stars and, filled with awe, worshipped *them*. Few today identify God with celestial bodies, but many moderns think God is immanent. Even if the arguments for a transcendent God are useless for the Christian, still may they not have some use for those less blessed?⁵¹

Conclusion

Plantinga's great respect for the work of the Holy Spirit is only to be admired. But he is surely mistaken to declare that the Spirit must work within the narrow confines he has delineated. He thus does an injustice to the witness of scripture, the teachings of Aquinas and Calvin, and the basic assumptions of common sense that regulate our everyday thinking. But perhaps, given the self-contained, subjective nature of Plantinga's concept of warranted Christian belief, one cannot ask of it more than it was designed to provide. That is, if Swinburnian evidentialism were introduced into Plantinga's epistemology, would that not destroy what makes his epistemological system unique? Plantinga of course would answer in the affirmative. And this might well be the case. But, given the enormous influence Plantinga's thought has had, to abandon his

⁵¹ Boyle et al., "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology; A Catholic Perspective," 204.

epistemology as hopelessly fideistic and beyond the realm of improvement seems theologically irresponsible.

However, perhaps there are ways in which Plantinga's seemingly fideistic epistemology could be combined with the evidentialist kind. For example, one could concede that Plantinga is correct when he claims that certain beliefs are properly basic, and do not require proof. This could be compared to what Paul says in Romans 1 about the innate knowledge of God that all humans have. What if Plantinga used his A/C model to support *only* this idea of general grace of which Paul speaks? Then, one could use apologetics of the Swinburnian and Starkian variety to supplement the idea of proper basicity, or to work toward transforming the general revelation found in his properly basic belief into the *special* revelation that comprises Christian, as opposed to merely theistic, belief.

Or, one could concede even more, and admit that Plantinga's model not only provides properly basic belief theistic belief, but that it supplies true Christian belief as well. But one would still have to decide exactly what constitutes valid, Holy Spirit-inspired Christian belief. In other words, which version of Christianity should Christians consider to be properly basic? The Roman Catholic version? The Protestant? The Orthodox? Even within each of these branches, there are serious disagreements as to what constitutes "true" faith (for instance, should the Bible be read in a literal, or a symbolic, manner?). Even if one granted that Plantinga's model does indeed provide true Christian faith, it might still be necessary to employ some kind of evidentialist approach to make his model more precise, and to increase the chances that what the Christian believes to be truly of God has objective, as well as subjective, support.

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