

## Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology, Evidentialism, and Evangelical Apologetics

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### I. Introduction

In this paper, I hope to evaluate the usefulness of reformed epistemology in an evangelical apologetic. Specifically, I will argue that Alvin Plantinga's appeal to properly basic belief in God is not as helpful as some may generally think. Although it seems to answer the atheistic objection to belief by placing the burden of proof upon the detractor of Christianity, it opens doors to several theological enterprises with which most evangelicals do not feel comfortable. In addition, the answers given by Plantinga to the major objections have, to some extent, tended to undermine the very project of reformed epistemology. Before an evaluation of reformed epistemology may be undertaken, a brief explanation of its tenets and responses to criticisms will be presented.

### II. Reformed Epistemology

Reformed Epistemology is the name given to a particular approach to religious belief that has seen a revival of sorts in recent years, largely due to the work of men such as William Alston, Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, George Mavrodes, among others.<sup>1</sup> According to

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<sup>1</sup>Although some have referred to Plantinga's reformed epistemology as *revolutionary*, Plantinga would hardly refer to it as such. In fact, he claims that he is just one in a long line of Christian theologians (going back at least as far as Aquinas and Calvin) who have made these claims. See Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 15 (1980): 49-63.

reformed epistemologists, belief in God is *properly basic*, at least for some people. The assertion that theistic belief is properly basic is the claim that “the believer is entirely within his intellectual rights in believing as he does even if he doesn’t know of any good theistic argument (deductive or inductive), even if he doesn’t believe that there is any such argument, and even if in fact no such argument exists.”<sup>2</sup> That is, Plantinga argues that one does not have to reason his way to theistic belief; that “it is perfectly rational to accept belief in God without accepting it on the basis of any other beliefs or propositions at all.”<sup>3</sup>

The claim that belief in God is properly basic is Plantinga’s attempt to answer what he refers to as the *evidentialist* challenge to theistic belief. The evidentialist challenge primarily deals with the reasons one holds to belief in God and states that there must be good reasons for one’s belief to be rational. As Plantinga puts it, evidentialist objectors “have argued that belief in God is irrational or unreasonable or not rationally acceptable or intellectually irresponsible or noetically substandard, because, as they say, there is insufficient evidence for it.”<sup>4</sup> If belief in God can be shown to be properly basic, or if the claim that belief in God is properly basic can be maintained, then the requirement of the evidentialist objector may be disregarded. Plantinga has buttressed this claim with his own critique of what he calls Strong Foundationalism, the

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<sup>2</sup>Alvin Plantinga, “Is Belief in God Properly Basic?” in *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman (Oxford: Oxford, 1992), 134. Reprinted from *Nous* XV (1981).

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 134.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 133. See also Alvin Plantinga, “Is Belief in God Rational?” in *Rationality and Religious Belief*, ed. C. F. Delaney (Notre Dame: Notre Dame, 1979), 7-27.

philosophy behind the evidentialist objection which takes a minimalist view of properly basic beliefs.<sup>5</sup>

### III. The Great Pumpkin Objection & Son of Great Pumpkin

Two separate, but related objections have been raised against Plantinga's claim that belief in God is (or *can be*) properly basic and its implications for theology and faith. The first objection, which Plantinga calls the "Great Pumpkin" objection, is the suggestion that reformed epistemology leads to relativism with respect to justified belief. The second objection, "Son of Great Pumpkin," is the claim that reformed epistemology leads to a sort of religious pluralism, or relativism with respect to religious belief. The two objections, as Plantinga presents them, are very similar and easily confused, so care must be taken when addressing their claims and in evaluating the responses of reformed epistemologists to them.

#### 1. The Great Pumpkin Objection

Plantinga asks if the claim that belief in God is properly basic opens the door to claims that just any belief say, for instance, belief in the Great Pumpkin, is properly basic. He does admit that judgments concerning which beliefs are properly basic are circumstance- and individual-dependent: certain beliefs are properly basic for certain persons in certain circumstances, but are not properly basic in other circumstances.<sup>6</sup> He also allows that one does not have to have a fully developed criterion for proper basicity before a belief may be judged

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<sup>5</sup>Plantinga offers two criticisms of strong foundationalism: first, strong foundationalism does not meet its own requirements for rationality (not self-evident, not incorrigible, not clear that it can be deduced from the self-evident and/or incorrigible beliefs), and second, many of our normal beliefs do not meet these requirements for rationality (e.g., "I believe my wife loves me"—not self-evident, not incorrigible, does not seem to be derived from the above).

<sup>6</sup>Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God" in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 74. "According to the Reformed epistemologist certain beliefs are properly basic in certain circumstances; those same beliefs may *not* be properly basic in other circumstances."

as properly basic for him/her. In fact, criteria for proper basicity are developed from below and thus, persons may not agree on a specific account of properly basic beliefs:

The Christian will of course suppose that belief in God is entirely proper and rational; if he does not accept this belief on the basis of other propositions, he will conclude that it is basic for him and quite properly so. Followers of Bertrand Russell and Madelyn Murray O'Hare may disagree; but how is that relevant? Must my criteria, or those of the Christian community, conform to their examples? Surely not. The Christian community is responsible to *its* set of examples, not to theirs.<sup>7</sup>

These admissions may seem to open the door to relativistic claims—that properly basic beliefs for one person are not properly basic for another, etc., and that therefore, anyone could claim proper basicity for any belief he or she happens to hold, even in the Great Pumpkin.

However, Plantinga claims that this is not the case. Rather, he asserts that under no circumstances could belief in the Great Pumpkin be properly basic. The key to defeating the Great Pumpkin objection is to be found in the fact that properly basic beliefs are not *groundless* (or at least, are not necessarily groundless).<sup>8</sup> For example, a properly basic belief in God may be grounded in one's experience of God. At this point, Plantinga admits that belief in God may not be properly basic, but instead may be *derived from*, or *based upon* beliefs that one has experienced God.<sup>9</sup> This admission, however, does not undermine Plantinga's objection to Strong

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 77. William Lane Craig makes a similar point in addressing the question of non-Christian theistic religions claiming to have an internal witness of God's spirit. He points out that their false claims should not impugn the accurate claims of the Christian. That is, just claiming that one has an internal witness of a divine spirit that buttresses one's claims to religious veracity does not necessarily do so. Craig writes, "But how is the fact that other persons claim to experience a self-authenticating witness of God's Spirit relevant to *my* knowing the truth of Christianity via the Spirit's witness? The existence of an authentic and unique witness of the Spirit does not exclude the existence of false claims to such a witness." William Lane Craig, "The Classical Method" in *Five Views on Apologetics* ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000): 35.

<sup>8</sup>It is interesting to note that Plantinga himself has complained that requirements for grounding are ambiguous at best. In his response to the grounding objection to the truth of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, Plantinga asked what it means for a statement to be *grounded*. Alvin Plantinga, "Replies" in *Alvin Plantinga: Profiles*, vol. 5, ed. James E. Tomberlin and Peter van Inwagen (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), 374.

Foundationalism and Evidentialism. It is further claimed that a properly basic belief may be discarded, if sufficient reasons are given, reasons that are sufficient *for that individual*. If so, then *that individual* is no longer justified in maintaining his belief in God (while someone else who has been presented with the same reasons may continue to be justified in believing in God).

This is a curious claim because it raises questions concerning the relationship between evidences and properly basic beliefs. Plantinga claims that evidences cannot establish basic beliefs, but can serve as defeaters for beliefs thought to be held in a basic way; that is, evidences can lead one to the conclusion that any given belief which was considered basic, should no longer be held, but cannot lead one to hold to a belief in a basic way.

Thus, Plantinga seems to be making the claim that belief in the Great Pumpkin can not be properly basic because such belief can not have *grounds*. That is, by raising the Great Pumpkin objection, he is trying to show that individuals cannot claim justification for just any belief they wish to hold—beliefs which are irrational or incoherent, for example, are not able to claim justification. He offers two other examples—belief in a flat Earth and belief in Humean skepticism. Those who hold to either position, Plantinga maintains, cannot claim justification because these beliefs cannot (at least in our day) have grounds. Proponents of these beliefs simply suffer from some sort of cognitive malfunction, and this seems to be Plantinga's point in his refutation of the Great Pumpkin objection. Perhaps another example will make the point more clear. Consider someone who holds to a belief that the fundamental laws of logic are false, or to a belief that all necessary truths are false. Surely such belief could not be justified; no one

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<sup>9</sup>What Plantinga seems to have in mind here are arguments against his view similar to that of Stewart C. Goetz, "Belief in God is Not Properly Basic" in *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Brenden Sweetman (Oxford: Oxford, 1992), 168-177.

could be justified in denying that all bachelors are unmarried, or that  $1+1=2$ ! This is the point Plantinga hopes to make by raising “Great Pumpkin.”

## 2. Son of Great Pumpkin

Even though Plantinga has effectively responded to objections which claim that reformed epistemology opens the door to relativism (that just any belief may be justified), he has not refuted the claim that his view leads to a sort of religious subjectivism or relativism or pluralism (In fact, the example of belief in the Great Pumpkin proves confusing because it could be taken to be a sort of religious belief). Plantinga refers to this objection as “Son of Great Pumpkin.” He begins by noting that, primarily, the objections to proper basicity have been focused at theism generally, but they may also apply (and presumably proper basicity as well) to specifically Christian belief (what Plantinga calls IIHS, or the Internal Instigation of the Holy Spirit). In response to Michael Martin’s claim that reformed epistemology leads to relativism and moves theism beyond rationalism, Plantinga states: “Why think a thing like that? Theistic belief would certainly *not* be immune to argument and defeat just by virtue of being basic.”<sup>10</sup> Plantinga gives the example of a dog in a field that was thought to be a sheep and then discovered to be a dog (either by personal investigation or by testimony of credible persons or witnesses): “So it is not true, in general, that if a belief is held in the basic way, then it is immune to argument or rational evaluation; why, therefore, think it must hold for theistic belief? . . . it is surely no consequence of my foundationalism or of the A/C model (simpliciter or extended) that basic beliefs are beyond rational appraisal.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford, 2000), 343. Martin’s critique of Plantinga is found in Michael Martin, *Atheist: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1990), 276f.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 344. “A/C model” is Plantinga’s shorthand for the Aquinas/Calvin model of theistic belief; that theistic belief can be properly basic.

What appears to be behind Martin's complaint is a suspicion that the society-dependent nature of basic beliefs or the individualistic nature of basic beliefs seems to open Plantinga's position to the charge that others' beliefs are also properly basic. So *Son of Great Pumpkin* is the objection that those who hold to other beliefs (religious in nature) could claim that their beliefs have warrant if such beliefs were basic to their particular community in a way similar or analogous to the way the reformed epistemologist can claim warrant for his belief. Plantinga lays out the objection in 3 steps:

- (1) If Reformed epistemologists can legitimately claim belief in God is properly basic, then epistemologists of another community can legitimately claim basicity for their beliefs.
- (2) The consequent is false (epistemologists cannot make that claim).
- (3) Neither can the Reformed Epistemologist claim proper basicity for theism.

Plantinga readily admits that, for example voodooists, could be *justified* in their claim for basicity of voodooism. This means that (2) is false and the objection fails. [Note, though, that he allows this on the basis of "cognitive malfunction."]. Plantinga also admits that voodooists could be *internally rational* in their claim for basicity of voodooism. This means that (2) is false and the objection fails: "Perhaps they have always been taught that these voodoo beliefs are true, and all alleged contrary evidence is cleverly explained away by the priests; or perhaps they are all in the grip of some cognitive malfunction upstream from experience, one that skews their doxastic experience."<sup>12</sup>

Plantinga concludes that for the objection to stand, rationality must be understood as "warrant." But the meaning of "legitimately claim" needs clarification:

- (4) Truthfully

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<sup>12</sup>Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 346.

(5) Justifiably

(6) Warrantedly

(4) cannot be right because theism can be true without voodooism also being true. Then (1) of the argument would be false. (5) cannot be right because it seems that if it were the case, then premise (2) would be false. Voodooists could be justified in maintaining that voodooism is properly basic, but then the force of the argument is lost. Thus, Plantinga concludes, “legitimately claim” must mean something like “warrantedly.”

This means that Martin’s contention is that if the Reformed Epistemologist’s claim that belief in God is properly basic is warranted, then so is the voodooist’s claim for proper basicity of voodoo. To be fair, though, this argument has moved beyond the scope of Plantinga’s work and claims. Plantinga writes, “A problem with evaluating this version of the argument is that the Reformed epistemologist (*this* Reformed epistemologist, anyway) doesn’t claim as part of his philosophical position that belief in God and the deliverances of IHS do have warrant. That is because (above, p. 186ff.) in all likelihood they have warrant only if they are true, and I am not arguing that these beliefs are in fact true.”<sup>13</sup>

Thus far, the basic position of reformed epistemology has been outlined, along with the two most prominent critiques. The most common answers by reformed epistemologists to those criticisms have also been presented, even if only briefly. We are now in a position to offer our own critique of this approach to religious belief, specifically as it relates to the work of Christian apologetics.

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 347.



## IV. Problems

### 1. Tacit Endorsement of Evidentialism.

Ultimately, it seems to me that reformed epistemology relies on an underlying belief in evidentialism, or at least tacitly endorses it. The examples of properly basic belief given by reformed epistemologists are telling. Kelly Clark, following Plantinga, presents some examples of how one might come to acknowledge his basically held belief in God.

His first example is of person, David, who warns you that your wife is cheating on you. Clark asks what you should do: “Confront her with what you take to be the truth, straight from David’s letter? Hire a detective to follow her for a week and hope against hope the letter is a hoax? Or do you simply remain secure in the trust that you have built up all those years?”<sup>14</sup> Presumably, Clark means to suggest that trusting one’s wife in the face of evidence of unfaithfulness is akin to basic belief in God. This, however, is not the case, for it seems that the individual faced with this situation would examine evidences. For example, he would weigh the credibility (for him) of the claimants—David is a stranger, and his wife is an intimate companion. The 15 years of marriage would also, it seems, function as a sort of evidence for belief in her faithfulness. The fact that there has been no change in her behavior would also serve as evidence of her fidelity. Thus, it seems that consideration of evidences and construction of arguments (even if somewhat unconscious) play into the supposed example.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Kelly James Clark, “The Reformed Epistemological Method” in *Five Views on Apologetics* ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000): 266.

<sup>15</sup>While most of us may wish to dismiss David’s warnings, we will still create in our minds reasons for doing so, and these reasons can include an appeal to evidence against David’s reliability as well as for our wives’ faithfulness. That is, it seems that most persons would wonder why another warned of his spouse’s unfaithfulness and would have to satisfy his own curiosity. Such satisfaction could be as simple as dismissing David as a kook or as complex as reflecting back upon his wife’s behavior or her schedule, as well as attempting to evaluate David’s temperament, motivation, etc.

Second, Clark offers up the so-called *problem of other minds*. He suggests that, when first confronted with the problem and with suspicion regarding the personhood of your wife, you should “simply trust your deep-seated conviction that, in spite of the lack of evidence, your wife is a person and deserves to be treated as such.”<sup>16</sup> The problem with this argument is that one *does* have evidence of the personhood of his wife—at least as far as deductive arguments go (analogy to self). There is also evidence against the suggestion that she is a cleverly constructed robot. A robot/computer so sophisticated has never been made, though there are some scientists who desire to do so. That is, the fact that there are scientists who express a desire to create artificial intelligence and personality for computers/robots can serve as evidence that no such robot currently exists.

Third, Clark, following Plantinga, suggests that an immediate awareness of God’s love could come from one’s experience of nature. Clark suggests that one could start believing in God because of a retreat outdoors: “. . . suppose that you are on a retreat or on the top of a mountain and have a sense of being loved by God or that God created the universe. You begin to believe in God, not because you are persuaded by the argument from design—you are simply taken with belief in God. You just find yourself believing, what you had heretofore denied, that God exists.”<sup>17</sup> This example is unclear because, though Clark claims that one might just immediately believe in God on the occasion of his experience of nature, just *how* the experience is connected to the belief is unclear. If one comes to believe in a Creator *because of* his experience of nature, then it seems that the individual’s thought process did follow something like a basic teleological argument. This is not to say that the individual was presented a full-

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<sup>16</sup>Clark, “The Reformed Epistemological Method”: 267.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 267.

blown teleological argument, weighed the pros and cons, and made a “fully-informed” decision. It is merely to say that he perhaps had a crude version of the teleological argument in mind (e.g., The world is beautiful and must have been created; The Creator must be God and worthy of my devotion). If something like this were not the case, as Clark and Plantinga claim, then why is the experience of nature the occasion of belief? Why do they not offer an example of an individual sitting in a dark room who suddenly and without warning, begins to believe in God? It seems that such an example is not given because it is hardly believable, for something must occasion the belief.<sup>18</sup>

So, none of the examples given are particularly compelling, at least not as presented. But what of belief in other minds? According to Plantinga and other reformed epistemologists, we do not come to belief that other minds exist or that other people have minds by means of argumentation or through consideration of evidences. Rather, we just believe that there are other minds and that other people do have minds in an immediate, basic sort of way. Is this the case? Who is to say that we do not go through some sort of rudimentary argument such as the following:

- (7) That being looks like I
- (8) That being acts like I
- (9) I have a mind
- (10) Therefore, it probably does too

It seems that any belief we *choose* to hold must go through just such a process. The very concepts of choice and belief seem to assume a thought process whereby evidences and

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<sup>18</sup>I am not here suggesting that blind persons cannot come to faith, but rather that a static setting, devoid of interaction with the world is not used by Reformed Epistemologists as the setting for belief attainment for the very reason that beliefs are generated through experience and reflection upon that experience. Such reflection, I am suggesting, takes the form of some kind of rudimentary argument.

arguments, though perhaps simple, are weighed and judged.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps Plantinga and other reformed epistemologists have something else in mind. They will probably respond to this argument by claiming that my *continuing to believe* in other minds may be dependent upon argument, but that my *initial* belief in other minds was not so dependent. In order to evaluate this claim, I would need to identify when I first began believing that other minds exist. I am not sure I can do so—it seems to me that it was very early in my life, when I first gained self-awareness, but beyond that, I am not sure there is much I can say. At any rate, it may very well be the case that I just believed without argumentation or much thought at all.

This may be true for belief in God. After all, Jesus said that we must have faith as a child in order to enter the kingdom of God (Mk. 10:15). Perhaps this saying refers to a kind of belief very similar in nature to what reformed epistemologists refer to as properly basic belief. But is this really the kind of explanation of our faith we wish to adopt? It seems to me that it is not, at least not insofar as we are engaged in apologetics, and especially not if we are offering an apology against an atheistic detractor. For it seems that *this* position is open to attack by the atheist (see below).

There is another way that reformed epistemology seems to tacitly endorse evidentialism. In his response to Great Pumpkin, Plantinga claims that belief in the Great Pumpkin could not be properly basic because such belief could not have *grounds*. Why not? As already mentioned, the grounds of (properly basic) theistic belief is one's supposed experience of God. By saying "supposed" experience of God, I do not mean to imply that the individual did not actually *have* an experience of God, but rather that the individual *believes* that he had an experience of God.

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<sup>19</sup>I take this, or something very similar, to be the substance of Norman Kretzmann's critique of reformed epistemology. See Norman Kretzmann, "Evidence Against Anti-Evidentialism" in *Our Knowledge of God*, ed. Kelly James Clark (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1992), 17- 38.

Could the Great Pumpkinist not *believe* he had an experience of the Great Pumpkin? Plantinga does not seem to think so—the individual who holds to such belief must have a mind that is not functioning properly (a person whose mind is functioning properly just would not believe he had had an experience with the Great Pumpkin). Perhaps this line of questioning is unfair, given the real objective behind raising Great Pumpkin.

However, the response to Great Pumpkin does raise at least one problem: the meaning of *grounds* for belief. Plantinga does not specify what may count as grounds for any given belief; he simply gives some examples of the kinds of things (or events) that may serve to ground one's belief in God. How grounds for belief are different from evidence for belief is not clear. Normann Kretzmann does not think they are different at all, and has complained that the reason Plantinga's argument seems to work is because he uses an exceedingly narrow definition of *evidence*, among other things.<sup>20</sup> If they are essentially the same, then Plantinga has rejected the evidentialist objection to theistic belief, but has utilized an evidentialist objection to Great Pumpkinistic belief. If they are not the same, then clarification of *grounds* is in order. Merely citing examples of the grounds for some beliefs of some people is not particularly helpful for this clarification. It seems that Plantinga wants to allow a *real* (or genuine) experience of the divine to ground one's belief in God. Such a position would ground belief in God (because it is true)

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<sup>20</sup>In discussing an example given by Plantinga which concerns a 14 year old boy, Ted, Kretzmann states, "Plantinga's reason for denying that Ted has evidence can't be that the grounds for his belief are sub-propositional, merely experiential. His reason for denying that Ted has or ever had evidence for his belief that God exists seems to be that the propositions that would strike an evidentialist as Ted's evidence for theism were never used by Ted as a basis for *acquiring* his belief. Ted 'does not believe in God *on the basis* of evidence'; 'he does not take that testimony as evidence' just because he doesn't employ it in an argument that leads him to accept what he's been told. Plantinga, it seems, considers something to be evidence for *S's* belief that *p* only if it is *ulterior* evidence, *propositional* evidence, and evidence *relied on by S in coming to believe that p.*" Kretzmann, "Evidence Against Anti-Evidentialism", 26. In addition to the narrow definition of "evidence," Kretzmann also cites an exclusively generative interpretation of "believe on the basis of." He writes, "Plantinga's attending exclusively to the *generative* interpretation of 'believe on the basis of' results in his neglecting the far more common and more important interpretation of that phrase as concerned only with the *support* of belief. Significantly, in several places in his anti-evidentialist articles he develops his notions of evidence (and basis) in terms of what he calls 'belief *formation.*'" Kretzmann, "Evidence Against Anti-Evidentialism", 27.

while it would preclude belief in the Great Pumpkin because it could not be grounded in a real experience of the Great Pumpkin. However, Plantinga has already noted that, while he believes in God's existence (and the work of the Holy Spirit in aiding belief formation), he is not here presenting an argument for its truth, but this is what he seems to assume here and is required to ground the grounds for theistic belief.

## 2. Apologetics Directed at Atheism

(1) **Answer to the *de jure* objection.** The *de jure* objection to theistic belief is strongly tied to the evidentialist objection to theistic belief. The *de jure* objection includes three components: appeals to evidence, appeals to one's basic beliefs, and appeals to one's moral obligations. The ideology behind it is epitomized in the now oft-quoted claim of W. K. Clifford, "it is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon sufficient evidence."<sup>21</sup> That is, the *de jure* objection to theistic belief is the claim that theists must have compelling reasons for their belief in God if that belief is to be taken as rational or, in Plantinga's words, if they are to be *epistemically justified* in believing, and that if they do not, then they are morally obligated to discard those beliefs.

To be fair, it must be admitted that reformed epistemologists have viewed their task as providing an answer to the *de jure* objection to theism.<sup>22</sup> They have been able to offer an answer to that objection—it simply is not true. The moral obligation to discard one's beliefs if they are not supported by *sufficient* evidence simply does not stand. Not only can one be rational in

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<sup>21</sup>W. K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief" in *Lectures and Essays* (London: MacMillan, 1901), 183.

<sup>22</sup>For example, Nicholas Wolterstorff writes, "I see no reason to suppose that people who hold as one of their immediate beliefs that God exists always have adequate reason to surrender that belief—or ought to believe that they do. I see no reason to suppose that holding the belief that God exists as one of one's immediate beliefs always represents some failure on one's part to govern one's assent as well as one ought." Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God Be Rational If It Has No Foundations?" in *Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: Notre Dame, 1983), 176.

believing in God, even apart from evidences, but he can be justified in believing in God without any appeals to evidence.

**(2) Open door to standard atheistic objection.** The response of Plantinga to the Great Pumpkin and Son of Great Pumpkin objections seems to open the door to the standard atheistic objection. In order to see how, consider a similar belief: belief in the Easter Bunny. When I was a child, I believed in the Easter Bunny (Peter Rabbit). I am not sure when I first *began* to believe in the Easter Bunny, but I suppose it was sometime soon after I was able to understand what a rabbit is, what it means to hop around the world depositing baskets full of jelly beans and chocolate bunnies and hiding chocolate eggs throughout the house (This, at least, is what he did at *our* house; whether he did so at everyone's house I could only assume, though I must admit I did not particularly care). The reason I believed in the Easter Bunny is primarily because my parents told me to. There was no logical, deductive argument to his existence; I just believed it.<sup>23</sup> Now it seems clear enough that the reformed epistemologist would be committed to the thesis that I held to belief in the Easter Bunny in a basic sort of way, and [most likely] that I was justified in doing so.

But it seems equally clear that the reformed epistemologist would also claim that my *continuing* to hold my belief in the Easter Bunny would not be justified. That is, 5 year old boys whose parents told them that the Easter Bunny is real are justified in believing in the Easter Bunny, while 35 year old men are not. At some point, I grew out of my belief in the Easter Bunny—perhaps it was when I began to distinguish between reality and fantasy, perhaps it was

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<sup>23</sup>This claim, of course, could be disputed. Perhaps some rudimentary form of argument for belief in the Easter Bunny was at the heart of my belief. Perhaps something like the following: My parents told me to believe in the Easter Bunny; I should only believe something someone has told me to believe if I have good grounds for believing that person is reliable; I have good reasons for believing my parents are reliable; Therefore, I believe what they tell me about the Easter Bunny; and therefore, I believe in the Easter Bunny.

when I realized the impossibility of hopping around the world. I do not know exactly when it was, but I can point to a definitive moment when my disbelief was confirmed: it was the night before Easter when I caught my mother signing my autograph book which I had left out for Peter Rabbit to sign [I know, a somewhat strange family ritual, but nevertheless . . .]. I had my suspicions before then, but that was the confirmation that there was no Easter Bunny, and no matter what explanation my mother tried to offer (and she attempted many), I was no longer able to believe in him. The point of all this is to note that, according to reformed epistemology, there was a time when I moved from being justified in holding my belief in the Easter Bunny, to not being justified in holding my belief in the Easter Bunny. The reason for the lack of justification for belief in the Easter Bunny seems to be that I *outgrew* my belief.

But how is this different from the atheistic objection to theistic belief? It does not appear to be substantially different at all. Feuerbach, Freud, Nietzsche and others argued that theistic belief is no longer acceptable because humanity has *outgrown* its need for belief in God. Feuerbach's study of Christianity was his attempt to reverse what he saw as the false objectification of humanity in God. As Feuerbach put it, he hoped to change ““the friends of God into friends of man, believers into thinkers, worshipers into workers, candidates for the other world into students of this world, Christians, who on their own confession are half-animal and half-angel, into men—whole men, theologians into anthropologists, . . . religious and political footmen of a celestial and terrestrial monarchy and aristocracy into free, self-reliant citizens of the earth.”<sup>24</sup> Those who continue to maintain belief in God in the face of the evidence that modern man has amassed against it are, to some extent, noetically challenged. Freud claimed that belief in God is a result of hidden, sometimes subconscious wishes: “religious ideas

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<sup>24</sup>Ludwig Feuerbach, *Lectures on the Essence of Religion*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 285.



which are given out as teachings, are not precipitates of experience or end-results of thinking: they are illusions, fulfillment of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes.”<sup>25</sup> It was on this basis that he referred to religious beliefs as “infantile.” Nietzsche’s claim that God is dead, though surely meant to be seen as a criticism of the church of his day, probably also includes the thought that modern man no longer needs to believe in God.<sup>26</sup> The *superman* is the individual who realizes the human condition (i.e., that there is no God) and succeeds on his own.<sup>27</sup>

### 3. Apologetics Directed at Non-Christian Religions

**(1) Open door to pluralism.** In his response to Great Pumpkin, Plantinga seems to have opened the door to a pluralistic conception of religion. As already noted, it appears that Plantinga is committed to saying that many beliefs can be justified in claiming proper basicity. While Plantinga maintains that belief in the Great Pumpkin cannot have adequate grounds, he does believe that any belief in God could have grounds. Presumably, though, beliefs contrary to Christianity may be held by *some* individuals in *certain* circumstances as properly basic. That is, for example, belief in Krishna may be properly basic for some Hindus (given the right conditions). Does this cause a problem for the Christian evangelical philosopher who wishes to maintain exclusivism? Does it lead to some form of universalism, pluralism, inclusivism, or religious subjectivism?

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<sup>25</sup>Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 21:22. While it must be admitted that Freud defined “illusion” in such a way as to allow for its truth, he later referred to religious beliefs as “delusions.” See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 21:81-85. These quotations were taken from Merold Westphal’s interesting analysis of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, *Suspicion & Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 53.

<sup>26</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*.

<sup>27</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “On the Higher Man.”

Plantinga has addressed this issue on more than one occasion. In essence, his answer has been to note that, although followers of other faiths may have propositional and phenomenological evidence they believe favors their beliefs, this does not automatically *prove* that their beliefs and those of a Christian *really are* on par with one another:

. . . the believer in question doesn't really think the beliefs in question *are* on a relevant epistemic par. She may agree that she and those who dissent are equally convinced of the truth of their beliefs and even that they are internally on a par, that the internally available markers are similar, or relevantly similar. But she must still think that there is an important epistemic difference; she thinks that somehow the other person has *made a mistake*, or *has a blind spot*, or hasn't been wholly attentive, or hasn't received some grace she has, or is in some way epistemically less fortunate.<sup>28</sup>

In addition, it should be noted that proper basicity says nothing about the *truth* of a belief. Instead, it is merely the claim that certain persons are *justified*, are within their epistemic rights, for holding to a particular belief. Plantinga goes on to point out that warranted beliefs are a result of a properly functioning mind. Thus, the claim that one who believes in Krishna could be warranted is not only the claim that he could be *justified* or within his epistemic rights, but also

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<sup>28</sup> Alvin Plantinga, "A Defense of Religious Exclusivism" in *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith*, ed. Thomas D. Senior (Ithaca: Cornell, 1995): 204-205. In his defense of exclusivism, Plantinga points out that the charge that one is not justified in holding to exclusivism is based on the premise that the individual is fully aware of other religions, knows that there is much that at least looks like genuine piety and devotion in them, and does not believe there are conclusively convincing arguments for his own beliefs. Some claim that exclusivism is intellectually arbitrary—that the exclusivist chooses to believe exclusivism arbitrarily in the face of the plurality of religions. Plantinga points out that this objection requires that all beliefs/religions be on an epistemic par one with another *for the individual*. But this is rarely the case. For the believer in Christianity, for instance, the claims of Christianity are not on par with the claims of Hinduism. The Christian has many reasons for accepting Christianity as true—perhaps it fits well with her beliefs about the world, perhaps it accords well (best) with her phenomenological experiences.

Plantinga then moves to consider the charge that exclusivism is irrational. He proposes several meanings for rationality: (1) Aristotelian Rationality, (2) Deliverances of Reason, (3) Deontological Sense, (4) Zweckrationalität, and (5) Sanity and Proper Function. Plantinga assumes that the charge of irrationality must be tied to the fifth idea, which is also tied to the question of warrant. Thus, the objection must be that the exclusivist does not have warrant for her beliefs; can't know that her beliefs are true. Plantinga argues that she can. If knowledge is defined as *justified true belief*, two conditions must be met: 1) she has to be justified in her belief (which has already been shown to be possible—she isn't necessarily violating any intellectual rules or obligations), and 2) the beliefs must be true (which certainly seem possible!). In other words, for the complaint to stand, one of the two needs to be shown to be false. This has not been done. Ultimately, Plantinga suggests that the Christian may claim to have warrant for his exclusivist belief because of a *Sensus Divinitatis* (IHS).

that his mind could be functioning properly. Now, this may pose a problem, for some evangelicals wish to maintain that unregenerate persons do, in some sense, suffer from cognitive malfunction, at least with respect to spiritual insight and understanding. To be fair, Plantinga may agree that unregenerate persons do so suffer, but how he reconciles this with his claim that their beliefs *could* be warranted is unclear at best!

Plantinga's response to Son of Great Pumpkin makes the problem of pluralism more evident, for the end result is that he admits that some followers of other theistic religions can claim to be justified in their beliefs; that some non-Christian theists may have warrant for their beliefs—if they are true, then they very well could be warranted:

For any such set of beliefs, couldn't we find a model under which the beliefs in question have warrant, and such that, given the truth of those beliefs, there are no philosophical objections to the truth of the model? Well, 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. Perhaps these religions are like Christianity in that they are subject to no *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.<sup>29</sup>

**(2) Open door to evidentialism.** The problem with these responses is that they move the discussion from justification to warrant, and from warrant to truth. Although, properly speaking, Plantinga makes no judgments about the truth of any given religious belief, it seems that such judgments must be made if persons are to make claims to holding their beliefs *warrantedly* and if apologetics are to be conducted. Herein lies the problem—in order to claim warrant for one's beliefs, he has to make claims to their truthfulness, but in order to prove the truth of his beliefs, he will need to make appeals to evidence. That is, the answer to the Son of Great Pumpkin objection, which moves beyond the general statement that anyone who holds to a

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<sup>29</sup>Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 350.

theistic belief may claim proper basicity for that belief, to the suggestion that some beliefs have warrant if they are true, necessarily involves some appeals to evidence. But then the basic thesis of Plantinga's anti-evidentialism has been compromised.

#### 4. Other Problems

(1) **Tautological.** William Lane Craig has correctly noted that there is a very real difference between *knowing* Christianity to be true and *showing* Christianity to be true. The inner witness of the Holy Spirit gives immediate assurance of the truth of Christianity to the Believer. All arguments against Christianity fail (at least for the Christian) because of that witness of the Spirit. He writes, “. . . arguments and evidence incompatible with that truth [Christianity] are overwhelmed by the experience of the Holy Spirit for the one who attends fully to it.”<sup>30</sup>

He seems to be endorsing (ultimately) the thesis of this paper—that reformed epistemology really finds its value in the lives of individual Christians, not in the Apologetic endeavor. Yet, there is one curious note that does not seem to have been addressed as of yet. If the claims of reformed epistemology are taken to be true—that people just believe in God in an immediate sort of way, apart from evidences and argumentation, then there is little, if any, need to inform those persons that they are allowed to do so. Have they not already made that assumption (if they have thought about it at all)? What comfort is there in being told what you already take to be the case? Does it not just seem redundant, meaningless, or inane? Consider one example presented by reformed epistemologists—the example of other minds. Now, apart from philosophers, most people take it to be the case that other people do have minds.<sup>31</sup> Suppose

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<sup>30</sup>Craig, “The Classical Method”: 30.

<sup>31</sup>Kelly Clark takes this to be the case as well. See Clark, “The Reformed Epistemological Method”: 267.

you were to walk out of this building get into a taxi, and tell the taxi driver that not only does he have a mind, but other people also have minds, and that he is allowed to believe that other people have minds. How do you think he would respond? It is possible that he would breathe a sigh of relief and tell you that he had been struggling with thoughts of his epistemic justification for believing in other minds and that you have now laid his fears to rest, but more likely than not, he will look askance at you and wonder what you have been up to. That is, he won't find relief, but will take what you tell him to be obvious and rather unhelpful. It seems to me that the response to reformed epistemology by typical believers would be the same—being told that they are allowed to believe in God is not particularly enlightening, liberating, or comforting.

## V. Conclusion

So what are we to conclude about the value of reformed epistemology? It seems to me that its value is not really located in apologetics. Rather, its value is in its contribution to Systematic Theology. It does not add a lot to our defense of Christianity against atheistic objectors—what it gains by answering the *de jure* objection, it loses by giving weight to the suggestion that certain beliefs are to be *outgrown*, or rejected as we mature, the basic argument against theism since Feuerbach. In order to combat this argument, the reformed epistemologist must appeal to evidences in defense of his faith, but then his response to the *de jure* objection has been undermined.

It also does not add much to our defense of Christianity against other religions. If the discussion remains at the level of justification, then it seems to endorse a sort of pluralism. If the discussion moves beyond justification to warrant of true beliefs, then it seems to require appeals

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to evidence in order to demonstrate the truthfulness of one set of beliefs over against the other set of beliefs. Last, it does not really add much to the strengthening of the faith of believers, in that it just restates what believers already take to be the truth.

Ultimately, it seems to me that reformed epistemology can serve Systematic Theology well. Insofar as Systematic Theology is to be distinguished from Apologetics by means of purpose and audience. Systematic Theology seeks to explain the faith of a given community for members of that community, while Apologetics seeks to defend the faith of that community against its detractors. Reformed Epistemology can serve to explain the process of coming to faith without having to serve as a defense of the faith.