

**Alvin Plantinga**  
An Evaluation of Reformed Epistemology

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Is there a God? How does one know God exists? What is the relationship between faith and reason? These are some of the fundamental questions of human experience. Alvin Plantinga is an important modern Christian philosopher who has had much to say on the subject of belief and knowledge of God. Plantinga has written numerous books and articles dealing with a variety of theistic questions, but he is most well-known for his ‘Reformed Epistemology.’ This paper will briefly consider Plantinga’s life and work while focusing mainly on an exposition and critique of Plantinga’s epistemology.

**Background**

Alvin Plantinga was born on November 15, 1932, in Ann Arbor, Michigan.<sup>1</sup> His mother, Lettie, was of Dutch-American descent, and his father, Cornelius, was born in Friesland but moved with his family to America while still a young boy. Both of Plantinga’s parents came from strong Calvinist backgrounds dating back several generations, and Plantinga was raised in the Dutch Reformed Church.<sup>2</sup> His father was also a philosopher holding a Ph.D in Philosophy from Duke University as well as a M.S. in Psychology, and it was from him that Plantinga gained an early love of philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Plantinga’s father moved his family from place to place over the course of his academic career, but the bulk of Plantinga’s junior high and high school years were

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1 Alvin Plantinga, “Self Profile,” in *Alvin Plantinga*, edited by James E. Tomberlin and Peter Van Inwagen, vol. 5 of *Profiles: An International Series of Contemporary Philosophers and Logicians* (Dordrecht, NL: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1985), 3.

2 Ibid., 3-4.

3 Ibid, 7.

spent in North Dakota where his father taught at Jamestown College. Plantinga enrolled at Jamestown College his senior year of high school but then transferred to Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan when his father accepted a position as a philosophy professor there. Plantinga spent two semesters studying at Harvard later returning to Calvin where he studied under William Harry Jellema and received his undergraduate degree in 1954. He began graduate work the same year at the University of Michigan studying under William P. Alston, Richard Cartwright, and William K. Frankena and received his M.A. in 1955.<sup>4</sup> Plantinga married his wife, Kathleen De Boer (also of a Dutch Reformed background), the same year. They have four children, Carl, Jane, William Harry, and Ann.<sup>5</sup> Plantinga earned his Ph.D in Philosophy from Yale in 1958, and began his teaching career in the Directed Studies Program there in 1957, but accepted a position as professor of philosophy at Wayne State University in Detroit in 1958. In 1963, Plantinga transferred to Calvin College where he was hired as Jellema's successor. After 19 years at Calvin, Plantinga became the John. A. O'Brien Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame in 1982, where he currently resides<sup>6</sup>.

Plantinga has written over 130 articles and 12 books during the course of his career, dealing with many of the central theistic questions. He has lectured all over the world and held numerous fellowships and positions, including President of the American Philosophical Division and President of the Society of Christian Philosophers.<sup>7</sup> Plantinga's scholarship and mentoring have helped many budding Christian philosophers to enter the field.<sup>8</sup> Some of his more famous work (aside from his Reformed epistemology) includes his use of the analogical argument for the

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4 Ibid., 7-18

5 Ibid., 14.

6 Ibid., 18-33.

7 Alvin Plantinga, *Curriculum Vitae*, University of Notre Dame Department of Philosophy, [http://philosophy.nd.edu/people/all/cv/PlantingaCV6\\_06.doc](http://philosophy.nd.edu/people/all/cv/PlantingaCV6_06.doc).

8 James K. Beilby, *Epistemology as Theology: An Evaluation of Alvin Plantinga's Religious Epistemology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 31.

existence of God (as well as a rejection of the traditional cosmological and teleological arguments) in *God and Other Minds*, a strengthened modal version of the ontological argument (*The Nature of Necessity*), an examination of the arguments for God's being and nature, an evolutionary argument against naturalism, and his Free Will Defense,<sup>9</sup> which is believed by many to be the strongest formulation and development of this argument in answering the problem of evil.<sup>10</sup> Before going further, it is worth briefly examining.

### Free Will Defense

Plantinga first offered this argument in *God and Other Minds* and later presented a refined version of it in *The Nature of Necessity* and *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Essentially, Plantinga is refuting the claim made by Mackie and Flew that God could create men with free will who would always do what is right. As John Feinberg points out, the crux of Plantinga's argument is that "causal determinism and freedom are incompatible."<sup>11</sup> Plantinga argues that in order for men to be free, they must be capable of committing moral good as well as moral evil, and God can't give men "the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so."<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, some of God's free creatures "went wrong," but this fact "counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against His goodness."<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, Plantinga argues that a world containing free creatures who sometimes perform evil "is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all."<sup>14</sup>

Plantinga's argument hinges on the notion of possible worlds. Plantinga rejects Leibniz's

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9 James F. Sennet, ed., *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 1-3, 211-213.

10 John S. Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 63.

11 Ibid., 64.

12 Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (1977; repr., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 30.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

notion that God could create any possible world he wanted. If, for example, there was a free person P who in situation S would always choose to perform a morally wrong action A, such as accepting a bribe, then if God wanted to prevent moral evil, He could not instantiate P.<sup>15</sup> Thus there is a possible person, and hence a possible world that God cannot create.<sup>16</sup> Plantinga calls the tendency towards immorality “transworld depravity” and suggests that it is possible that all men suffer from it.<sup>17</sup> Plantinga applies this same argument of free will to angels to explain the existence of natural evil.<sup>18</sup>

### **Reformed Epistemology**

Plantinga’s free will defense is a significant accomplishment, but he is best known for his epistemology. Although hinted at in the close of *God and Other Minds*, Plantinga's first full formulation of this significant argument came in his controversial article “Reason and Belief in God.”<sup>19</sup> It is important to understand that Plantinga is trying to defend theism from atheists such as Antony Flew and Michael Scriven, who hold “that belief in God is irrational or unreasonable or not rationally acceptable or intellectually irresponsible or somehow noetically below par because, as they say, there is *insufficient evidence* for it.”<sup>20</sup> Plantinga identifies two claims that atheists make: (1) “It is irrational or unreasonable to accept theistic belief in the absence of sufficient evidence or reasons,” and (2) “We have no evidence or, at any rate, not sufficient evidence for the claim that God exists.”<sup>21</sup> In *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga recognizes two similar objections—the *de jure* challenge (Christian belief is epistemically irrational and

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15 Ibid., 45-47.

16 Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 142-143.

17 Ibid., 48.

18 Ibid., 149-155.

19 Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, edited by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

20 Ibid., 17

21 Ibid., 27.

unwarranted) and the *de facto* challenge (Christian belief is false).<sup>22</sup> Interestingly enough, “it is the first claim that Plantinga wishes to challenge.”<sup>23</sup> Plantinga argues for theism by refuting evidentialism which he links with classical foundationalism.

Classical foundationalism is a view of epistemology that holds that an individual has certain beliefs that are foundational—they uphold one’s whole belief system, or noetic structure—and are not believed on the basis of anything else. These are called basic beliefs, and they provide the support for all one’s other views, or non-basic beliefs.”<sup>24</sup> For the classical foundationalist, “the only properly basic propositions are those that are self-evident [such as  $2 + 2 = 4$ ] or incorrigible [i.e. a belief such that if it is held by an individual, it cannot be false as ‘I seem to see a tree’], or evident to the senses [‘there is a tree in front of me’].”<sup>25</sup> It is these three criteria for proper basicity that Plantinga proceeds to attack.

Plantinga argues that there are many ordinary beliefs not held on the basis of others that do not meet the foundationalist’s criteria:

If these claims are true, then enormous quantities of what we all in fact believe are irrational. . . . Consider all those propositions that entail, say, that there are enduring physical objects, or that there are persons distinct from myself, or that the world has existed for more than five minutes: none of these propositions, I think, is more probable than not with respect to what is self-evident or incorrigible for me; at any rate no one has given good reason to think any of them is.”<sup>26</sup>

Plantinga argues that memory beliefs and beliefs that there are other people outside of oneself are rationally believed by most people and seem to be in the foundations of one’s “noetic structure”

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22 Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 167.  
 23 Keith M. Parsons, *God and the Burden of Proof: Plantinga, Swinburne, and the Analytic Defense of Theism* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1989), 32.  
 24 Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” 52  
 25 *Ibid.*, 59.  
 26 *Ibid.*

yet are “not probable with respect to what is properly basic.”<sup>27</sup> Even though such beliefs do not fit the foundationalist categories for proper basicity, still one holds them basically.

Plantinga points out that the proposition that a belief is basic only if it is self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses is not properly basic itself, nor supported by a basic argument. Thus, the foundationalist “is self-referentially inconsistent in accepting” classical foundationalism.<sup>28</sup>

At this point Plantinga makes a novel suggestion—why cannot belief in God be properly basic? Indeed he argues that theistic (specifically Christian) belief is both warranted and basic for the believer.<sup>29</sup> In *Reason and Belief in God*, Plantinga writes that “there is in us a disposition to believe propositions of the sort *this flower was created by God* or *this vast and intricate universe was created by God* when we contemplate the flower or behold the starry heavens or think about the vast reaches of the universe.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed according to Plantinga, “There are therefore many conditions and circumstances that call forth belief in God: guilt, gratitude, danger, a sense of God’s presence, a sense that he speaks, perception of various parts of the universe.”<sup>31</sup> When this happens, one tends to believe certain propositions, such as “God is speaking to me” or “God disapproves of what I have done” which are “properly basic in the right circumstances.”<sup>32</sup> Because each of these propositions entails that God exists, technically it is not the “general proposition *God exists* that is properly basic, but instead propositions detailing some of his attributes or actions.”<sup>33</sup>

In *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga presents this view as the Aquinas/Calvin Model

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27 Ibid., 60.  
 28 Ibid., 60-61.  
 29 Ibid., 100.  
 30 Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” 80  
 31 Ibid., 81  
 32 Ibid.  
 33 Ibid.

(hereafter A/C model) because both Aquinas and Calvin “concur on the claim that there is a natural knowledge of God.”<sup>34</sup> Here Plantinga calls the natural tendency towards belief in God, the *sensus divinitatis* or sense of divinity.<sup>35</sup> Under the A/C model, all theistic belief “produced by the *sensus divinitatis*” is properly basic.<sup>36</sup> Plantinga points out, however, that “this natural knowledge of God has been compromised, weakened, reduced, smothered, overlaid, or impeded by sin and its consequences.”<sup>37</sup> The effects of sin explain why not everyone takes belief in God as properly basic.<sup>38</sup> It is only through the regeneration and the working of the Holy Spirit that the *sensus divinitatis* is fully restored.

Here it is important to introduce Plantinga’s notion of warrant because a belief can be accepted as basic but still not be warranted.<sup>39</sup> Warrant is Plantinga’s counterpart to the criteria of classical foundationalism, and he offers three conditions for it: “a belief has warrant for person *S* only if that belief is produced in *S* by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for *S*’s kind of cognitive faculties, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, as Plantinga acknowledges, these criteria presuppose three principles: there is a proper “design plan” for how human cognitive faculties should function, there is a proper environment where these faculties were designed to function, and these faculties should be virtuous or aimed at truth.<sup>41</sup> Under the A/C model belief in God meets all of these conditions:

[O]ur cognitive faculties have been designed and created by God; the design plan, therefore, is a design plan in the literal and paradigmatic sense. . . . the purpose of the *sensus divinitatis* is to enable us to have true beliefs about God; when it functions

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34 Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 170.

35 Ibid., 172.

36 Ibid., 177.

37 Ibid., 184.

38 Ibid., 217.

39 Ibid., 178.

40 Ibid., 156.

41 Ibid., 154-156.

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.<sup>42</sup>

Having demonstrated that theism can be warranted, Plantinga then extends his model to cover all of Christian belief.

Plantinga begins by explaining the Christian view of creation, fall, redemption—man was created in God’s image and had an extensive knowledge of God, however, he sinned and was alienated from God, distorting the *imago Dei* (and particularly for Plantinga, the *sensus divinitatis*), so God sent His Son Jesus Christ to pay the penalty for man’s sin, thus enabling him to experience salvation, regeneration, and restoration with God.<sup>43</sup> According to Plantinga, there are three things involved “in a believer’s coming to accept the great things of the gospel;” these are “Scripture (the divine teaching), the internal invitation or instigation of the Holy Spirit, and faith, the human belief that results.”<sup>44</sup> One reads Scripture and is convicted by the Holy Spirit that it is true, and faith is the belief and acceptance of these truths. Under the extended A/C Model such belief is clearly warranted. When Christian “beliefs are accepted by faith and result from the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit, they are produced by cognitive processes functioning properly.” The environment where this happens “is precisely the cognitive environment for which this process is designed.” Finally, “the process is designed to produce *true* beliefs, and these beliefs “are in fact true.”<sup>45</sup>

Normally, “in this model, the beliefs constituting faith are typically taken as basic; that is, they are not accepted by way of argument from other propositions or on the evidential basis of

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42 Ibid., 179.

43 Ibid., 205.

44 Ibid., 250.

45 Ibid., 257.



other propositions.”<sup>46</sup> This faith “process can go in a thousand different ways; in each case there is presentation or proposal of central Christian teaching and, by way of response, the phenomenon of being convinced, coming to see, forming of a conviction.”<sup>47</sup> However, Plantinga does acknowledge that theoretically the process could not be properly basic:

Of course they [the beliefs constituting faith] *could* be accepted on the basis of other propositions, and perhaps in some cases are. A believer could reason as follows: I have strong historical and archaeological evidence for the reliability of the Bible (or the church, or my parents, or some other authority); the Bible teaches the great things of the gospel; so probably these things are true. A believer *could* reason in this way, and perhaps some believers do in fact reason this way. But in this model it goes differently.<sup>48</sup>

Plantinga seems to be arguing that *generally* the beliefs of faith are formed basically.

Though he admits in theory that someone could base belief in God on the historical evidence for the truth of the Bible, Plantinga does not think very highly of this method. He feels that the historical “case isn’t strong enough to produce warranted belief that the main lines of Christian teaching are true.”<sup>49</sup> Plantinga proceeds to construct a probability argument for the truth of Christ’s teaching and the resurrection using calculus and concludes that because of “the principle of dwindling probabilities” requiring one to “multiply the relevant probabilities,” the result “isn’t anywhere nearly sufficient to support serious belief” in the truth of the gospel.<sup>50</sup>

It is important to remember that Plantinga’s model is only trying to prove that Christian belief is warranted if true, not that it is true: “What I claim for the model is only that it is (1) possible, (2) subject to no philosophical objections that do not assume that Christian belief is false, and (3) such that if Christian belief is true, the model is at least close to the truth.”<sup>51</sup>

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46 Ibid., 250.  
 47 Ibid., 251.  
 48 Ibid., 250.  
 49 Ibid., 272.  
 50 Ibid., 280.  
 51 Ibid., 351.

Plantinga acknowledges that if theism is false, then Christian belief is probably not warranted.<sup>52</sup> Ultimately, however, he recognizes that the *de facto* question is not independent of the *de jure* question: “If the *warrant* enjoyed by belief in God is related in this way to the *truth* of that belief, then the question whether theistic belief has *warrant* is not, after all, independent of the question whether theistic belief is true.”<sup>53</sup> Whether or not one accepts Plantinga’s model depends ultimately “on what sort of metaphysical and religious stance you adopt.” At its heart, “it is not merely an epistemological dispute but an ontological or theological dispute.”<sup>54</sup>

Plantinga does attempt to answer several objections to his model. The chief is what he calls the “Son of Great Pumpkin” objection. Essentially, this argument is that if Reformed epistemologists can claim that basic belief in God is rational, then epistemologists of some other religion could claim that their belief, no matter how strange, is properly basic for them.<sup>55</sup> Plantinga has two responses to this argument. He says that if Christianity was true for example and voodooism was false, just because the voodooist believed on the basis of some “natural phenomena of one sort or another,” such belief would not have warrant because it would be based on a false premise.<sup>56</sup> Plantinga also argues that just because a proposition is true, does not necessarily mean that it is warranted.<sup>57</sup> However, Plantinga does admit that there are some beliefs that could have warrant if they were true: “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

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52 Ibid., 186.  
 53 Ibid., 191.  
 54 Ibid., 190.  
 55 Ibid., 345.  
 56 Ibid., 348.  
 57 Ibid., 350.

are subject to no *de jure* objections that are independent of *de facto* objections.”<sup>58</sup> But he argues that this is not the case for just any belief.

### Historical Criticism

This leads to the first area of criticism. In many ways Plantinga seems to be presupposing both the truth of his model and of Christianity in general. Is Plantinga simply another variant of the presuppositionalism espoused by Cornelius Van Til and Gordon Clark? Though not immediately obvious, the answer is yes.

Van Til argues the believer “must also ask the non-Christian to place himself upon the Christian position for argument’s sake in order that he may be shown that only upon such a basis do “facts” and “laws” appear intelligible.”<sup>59</sup> In *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga does just that by asking his reader to assume the truth of Christianity, and then proving why such belief is warranted. Plantinga rejects the traditional cosmological, teleological, and ontological arguments for the existence of God,<sup>60</sup> just as Clark does<sup>61</sup> because Plantinga believes that theistic arguments are not a strong enough foundation for faith.<sup>62</sup> With Van Til, Plantinga does not think highly of the historical and evidential arguments for the truth of Scripture.<sup>63</sup> Plantinga’s *sensus divinitatis* is very similar to the “sense of deity” that Van Til claims is the point of contact between the believer and the unbeliever.<sup>64</sup> Overall, Plantinga’s process of coming to faith through hearing the Scripture (without giving the skeptic any prior arguments for its validity) and the conviction of

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58 Ibid., 350.

59 Cornelius Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1967), 100-101.

60 Plantinga, *God and Other Minds*, vii; Gordon H. Clark, “Apologetics,” in *Contemporary Evangelical Thought*, edited by Carl F. H. Henry (Great Neck, NY: Channel Press, 1957), 149.

61 Gordon H. Clark, *A Christian View of Men and Things* (1952; repr., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960), 28.

62 Alvin Plantinga, “Rationality and Public Evidence: A Reply to Richard Swinburne,” *Religious Studies* 37, no. 2 (2001): 220-21

63 Van Til, 115.

64 Ibid, 95.

the Holy Spirit is fairly similar to the presuppositionalist view of evangelism.

Nevertheless, there are some important differences. Unlike Van Til and Clark, Plantinga does see at least some place for theistic arguments:

Christians can quite properly offer any arguments for the truth of Christian belief they think are appropriate. I doubt that these arguments are sufficient to warrant the firmness of belief involved in faith . . . but it doesn't follow that they have no use at all. . . . They can confirm and support belief reached in other ways; they may move fence-sitters closer to Christian belief; they can function as defeater-defeaters; and they can reveal interesting and important connections. My main claim here is only that such arguments are not necessary for justified, rational and warranted Christian belief.<sup>65</sup>

Plantinga also seems to believe that the unbeliever can still reason on some level, as evidenced by his arguments designed to prove the rationality of his position to the unbeliever. And as James Beilby points out, Plantinga rejects the presuppositional notion “that the affections must first be cured by grace, and only then can the mind embrace the truth.”<sup>66</sup> Instead Plantinga argues that neither the intellect nor the will is primary in faith and regeneration.<sup>67</sup> Despite these differences, however, Plantinga is similar enough to presuppositionalists that he opens himself up to their main critique—presupposing the truth of Christianity reduces it to the level of a cult where one has no more evidence for Christianity than the Muslim does for his beliefs. This will be discussed more fully in the External Criticism section.

### Internal Criticism

Overall, Plantinga's epistemology is fairly internally consistent. The whole purpose of *Warranted Christian Belief* was to show that regardless of its truth, Christian belief could at least be internally rational and warranted.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless as James Sennett points out, there is an obvious inconsistency in Plantinga's philosophy. This has to do with the link between Plantinga's

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65 Plantinga, “Rationality and Public Evidence,” 217.

66 James K. Beilby, *Epistemology as Theology: An Evaluation of Alvin Plantinga's Religious Epistemology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 129.

67 Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 303.

68 *Ibid.*, xiii.

rejection of classical foundationalism and his argument for Reformed epistemology:

The RBG [*Reason and Belief in God*] argument for properly basic theistic belief is essentially thus: Evidentialism is the only reason to deny proper basicity of theistic belief; evidentialism rests on an unsubstantiated premise; furthermore, some noted theologians have denied evidentialism; therefore there is reason to believe that evidentialism is false and RE [Reformed Epistemology] true. But this sketchy overview holds little substantive philosophical motivation for assenting to RE.<sup>69</sup>

Essentially, Plantinga points out the problems in Classical Foundationalism and says that they are enough to reject evidentialism and assent to Reformed Epistemology. However, it does not follow that if Classical Foundationalism is faulty, then Reformed Epistemology is necessarily true. What does follow from Plantinga's argument is that the "problem cases," such as memory beliefs, should be added to list of properly basic beliefs in foundationalism. Sennett explains, "Evidentialism is consistent with (perhaps even entailed by) any number of MF [Modified Foundationalism] epistemological theories that escape Plantinga's self-referential inconsistency charge."<sup>70</sup> Thus, Plantinga's critique is not sufficient to reject all forms of evidentialism.

Sennett also notes a similar fallacy in Plantinga's argument for Reformed Epistemology. Plantinga offers a descriptive account of theistic belief and attempts to generalize it to all Christian believers: "There is an obvious is/ought fallacy here. Plantinga offers only descriptive evidence and attempts to draw a normative conclusion from it."<sup>71</sup> Paul Helm makes a similar objection.<sup>72</sup> As noted in the exposition, Plantinga says his model is one among several possible models and admits that faith could be formed on the basis of evidence, but at the same time he also argues that propositions of faith are usually formed basically.<sup>73</sup> Helm explains, "If Plantinga

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69 James F. Sennett, *Modality, Probability, and Rationality: A Critical Examination of Alvin Plantinga's Philosophy* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1992), 112.

70 Ibid, 109-110.

71 Ibid., 125.

72 Paul Helm, Review of *Warranted Christian Belief*, by Alvin Plantinga, *Mind* 110, no. 40 (2001): 1113.

73 . Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 170, 250.

is offering his account as a true description, it should surely be open to empirical corroboration or refutation. But if it is being offered as a normative account, as what faith ought to be or involve, Plantinga does not offer philosophical grounds for such a position (nor could he easily do so), though there may be theological grounds for it.”<sup>74</sup> A descriptive account of coming to faith does not necessarily hold for all believers.

One final internal criticism: if Plantinga maintains that theistic belief “is evidence nonessential, then he faces the problem of losing the relevance of practically all theological and testimonial support for RE.”<sup>75</sup> However, Plantinga himself relies heavily on the theological writings of Calvin and other Reformed thinkers in constructing his model. As Sennett notes, “Unless Plantinga can discover a way out of this unhappy situation, his RE project seems doomed to failure.”<sup>76</sup>

### **External Criticism**

Does Plantinga’s model fit with the facts of the world? Perhaps the biggest criticism of Plantinga’s work is that he never answers this question. Plantinga offers his A/C Model and says that he believes it is true, but he never attempts to prove the truth of Christianity to someone who does not already accept it. Instead he acknowledges that whether or not you accept his model depends on your prior theological views.<sup>77</sup> This “retreat into metaphysics” as Sennett calls it raises some troubling questions.<sup>78</sup> Deane-Peter Baker explains,

Plantinga’s model, as it stands, offers little or no reason why the unbeliever should take Christian belief any more seriously than, say, voodoo beliefs, or belief in the Great Pumpkin, or belief in Santa Claus, or whatever. All of these beliefs might well be warranted if true, says the objector, but that fact alone is insufficient to compel the unbeliever to treat them as genuine contenders in the quest to discover the truth about the

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74 Helm, 1114.

75 Sennett, 166.

76 Ibid., 167.

77 Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 191.

78 Sennett, 153.

way things really are.<sup>79</sup>

Plantinga simply does not provide enough justification for Christian belief. The proposition ‘God exists’ is “not obviously decidable on the basis of normal perceptual experience—just as (11) [I saw a giraffe loping down I-85] entails a proposition not obviously decidable on the basis of a momentary glimpse.”<sup>80</sup> Theistic belief “cannot be properly basically grounded in such experiences” and “is objectively evidence essential.”<sup>81</sup> As Swinburne notes, it is ordinary to judge the truth of a belief based on the evidence both for and against it: “a belief of a person S is rational if it is rendered (evidentially) probable by S’s evidence. Evidently—scientists, historians, judges and juries ask this question about their hypotheses.”<sup>82</sup> Even if the individual believer does not always rely on positive apologetics in coming to Christian faith, that evidence still needs to be available within the wider Christian community to justify belief.<sup>83</sup>

Baker summarizes the objection to Plantinga’s epistemology well with his Inadequacy Thesis: “the Reformed epistemologist’s contention that belief in God is properly basic and therefore warranted, even if technically successful, offers nothing to make the unbeliever think that the believer is at least *likely* to be *in fact* warranted.”<sup>84</sup> The “existence of a diverse range of religious (and non-religious) beliefs” creates a problem for Plantinga’s model. Why should the unbeliever choose Christianity over any other religion?<sup>85</sup> If the claims of Christianity cannot be defended objectively, the unbeliever has no more reason to prefer Christianity over Islam or Buddhism.

Plantinga rejects objective evidential arguments because he believes that their probability

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79 Deane-Peter Baker, “Plantinga’s Reformed Epistemology: What’s the Question?” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 57, no. 2 (2005): 95.

80 Sennett, 161.

81 *Ibid.*, 161, 165.

82 Richard Swinburne, “Plantinga on Warrant,” *Religious Studies* 37, no. 2 (2001): 107.

83 Sennett, 164.

84 Baker, 94.

85 *Ibid.*, 86.

is simply not high enough. However, as Timothy McGrew demonstrates, Plantinga’s probability argument against the historical case for Christianity is based on faulty reasoning. According to McGrew, “Plantinga’s critique of the historical argument is a failure—if not an abject failure, then at least a decisive one.”<sup>86</sup> Plantinga’s use of “dwindling probabilities” is a “skeptical strategy” that “is severely limited.”<sup>87</sup> Plantinga’s evaluation of this complex argument using “subjective probability estimates is fraught with dangers.”<sup>88</sup> McGrew explains,

The cumulative-case argument for Christianity, like any other cumulative-case argument, cannot be evaluated by running off-the-cuff probabilities through the theorem on total probability. We can arrive at sensible estimates of those probabilities only by a painstaking sifting of the empirical evidence, and a probabilistic argument will require Bayesian conditionalization and updating on this evidence.<sup>89</sup>

Clearly, the historical argument is far from dead.

This issue of religious diversity also raises another problem for Plantinga. Helm argues that Plantinga’s “defence of the rationality of Christian theism [is] not so much open to refutation as to imitation.”<sup>90</sup> Beilby asks, why could not “members of other world religions develop a model by which their beliefs could have warrant if they were true, just as Plantinga has?”<sup>91</sup> This is the ‘Son of the Great Pumpkin Objection.’ As quoted above, Plantinga acknowledges that other theistic religions could potentially argue that their beliefs have warrant but says his methodology cannot be applied to non-theistic religions.<sup>92</sup> Beilby contends that Plantinga is wrong and that his system of warrant could indeed be applied to nontheistic religions. Simply put, there are some fairly coherent non-theistic religions that could claim warrant if true. “In fact, in a recent article, David W. Tien argues that a Confucian could utilize a model parallel in all

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86 Timothy McGrew, “Has Plantinga Refuted the Historical Argument?” *Philosophia Christi* 6, no. 1 (2004): 24.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid., 25.

90 Helm, 1112.

91 Beilby, 131.

92 Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 350.



relevant aspects to Plantinga's A/C Model to demonstrate the warrant of Confucian beliefs."<sup>93</sup>

Plantinga's methodology seems to have provided a way other religions can defend their beliefs.

### **Ideological Criticism**

1 Peter 3:15 says Christians should always be ready "to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you." Plantinga's model leaves little room to respond to atheists or those of other faiths and demonstrate the truth of Christianity. As Dr. Montgomery notes in his *Tractatus*, if religious presuppositions cannot be tested objectively, then there is no reason for the unbeliever to accept Christianity over any other religion.<sup>94</sup> Multiple religions can claim experiential evidence. If there is no verifiability principle, the only way for the unbeliever to determine which religion is true is try them one by one.<sup>95</sup>

As was noted in the internal criticism, Plantinga's rejection of evidentialism fails. Christian beliefs can and should be defended empirically based on the historical evidence.<sup>96</sup> As Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 15:14, Christianity stands or falls on the truth of the resurrection. Plantinga is wrong in rejecting empirical arguments because they cannot demonstrate one hundred percent probability. Whenever one deals with facts, one leaves behind the realm of complete certainty.<sup>97</sup> Faith fills the gap between facts and certain knowledge. God is the author of reason and does not ask believers to put aside rationality when they accept Him by faith. Plantinga is right to emphasize the importance of Scripture and the conviction of the Holy Spirit in leading Christians to faith, but if non-believers have no reason to think the Bible is true, they will be unlikely to seriously consider any of its claims. Plantinga may be right that not everyone

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93 Beilby, 132.

94 John Warwick Montgomery, *Tractatus Logico-Theologicus*, 3<sup>rd</sup>. ed. (Bonn, Germany: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft/Culture and Science Publishers, 2005), prop. 2.182.

95 Ibid., prop. 2.9.

96 See for example Montgomery, *Tractatus*, prop. 3; John Warwick Montgomery, *Faith Founded on Fact: Essays in Evidential Apologetics* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute for Law, Theology, and Public Policy Inc., 2001).

97 Montgomery, *Tractatus*, prop. 3.1182.

examines the historical evidence before coming to Christian faith, but that does not lessen the importance of apologetics. When the storms of life begin to blow, if the believer has no foundational basis for his faith, he may encounter shipwreck.

### **Conclusion**

Plantinga is one of the most important Christian American philosophers. His work has spawned a host of other writing on the philosophy of religion: “Many 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.”<sup>98</sup> Plantinga’s Free Will Defense is generally believed to be the best to answer to problem of evil. Although, as this paper has demonstrated, Plantinga’s Reformed Epistemology is highly problematic, his work cannot be lightly discounted . Perhaps Plantinga’s greatest significance is that he “has helped to turn the tide against anti-theistic sentiments in academia.”<sup>99</sup> Plantinga has played a key role in bringing other budding Christian philosophers into the field by taking “personal interest in them” and helping them to secure positions at universities all around the country.<sup>100</sup> In order to understand the current climate for the philosophy of religion, one must look to Plantinga.

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98 Beilby, 29.

99 Ibid, 31

100 Ibid, 32.