Plantinga, Religious Discourse, and Epistemic Reasonability[1]

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1.Introduction

One approach to the issue of the relation of religious belief to reason and evidence is provided by number of authors who come from the Christian Calvinist tradition.[2] These authors (e.g., Alvin Plantinga,[3] Nicholas Wolterstorff,[4] and Kelly Clark[5])

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2 Possibly there is some affinity between this Calvinian view and the position held by John Hick in his response to the *University* debate. See Hick's "Theology and Verification," *Theology Today*, Vol. XVII (1960), pp. 12-31, and Lecture 1, above.

3 See, for example, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?," *Nous*, Vol. 15 (1981), pp. 41-51; "Is Belief in God Rational?," *Rationality and Religious Belief*, C.F. Delaney (ed.), Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979, pp. 7-27; "Reason and Belief in God," *Faith and Rationality*, A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff (eds.), Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983, pp. 16-93, and "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, Vol. 54 (1980), pp. 49-63.

4 See his texts, "Can Belief in God be Rational if it has no Foundations?," *Faith and Rationality*, op. cit. and *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdman's, 1976.

5 Kelly Clark, *Return to Reason: A Critique of Enlightenment Evidentialism and a Defense of Reason and Belief in God*, Grand Rapids: Eerdman's, 1990.

focus on the relation of reason and evidence to religious belief, drawing on the discussion of this relation that one finds in the works of the 16th century French reformer, Jean Calvin (1509-1564) and, in general, in those schools of thought that are associated with the Christian Reformed tradition.[6]

"Reformed epistemology" is not a kind of religious epistemology, for it deals with issues of knowledge, belief, and justification in general. It has been used (by Plantinga and others) to discuss our knowledge of other minds. But it is also an epistemology that is open to discussion of religious belief and religious truth.

Reformed epistemologists reject both classical foundationalism and evidentialism – and, by doing so, they also reject traditional natural theology (which they take to rest on foundationalist and evidentialist principles). In the first place, these authors argue that natural theology fails because it rests on assumptions that a person may rationally deny; reformed epistemology is, then, 'anti-foundationalist.'[7] And, second, reformed epistemologists hold that natural theology – which they claim is based on the view that "theistic belief is rationally acceptable only if there is sufficient evidence for it"[8] – is "radically misguided"[9]; they are, in other words, 'anti-evidentialists.'

According to these "Reformed thinkers," then, "it is entirely right, reasonable, rational and proper to believe in God without any evidence or argument at all."[10] Moreover, they hold that traditional natural theology is based on a false understanding of the nature of religious belief. Religious belief does not depend "on propositional evidence for its support"[11] because "belief in God is [not] like belief in scientific hypotheses."[12] A philosophical demonstration of religious belief is not even possible in principle.

Nevertheless, Reformed epistemologists are not fideists – and, in fact, the enterprise of the Reformed epistemologist of religion is largely apologetic; it is the defence of Christian religious belief. Specifically, the reformed epistemologist is concerned with the attacks from those who claim that empirical evidence and/

6 One sees this, to a lesser extent, in the 18th century Scottish philosopher, Thomas Reid (1710-1796).

7 *Return to Reason*, op. cit., pp. 25, 34, 40, 41.

8 "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?," op. cit., p. 41.

9 Ibid., p. 42.

10 "Reason and Belief in God," op. cit., p.17.

11 Clark, op. cit., p. 97.

12 Ibid.

or reason are inconsistent with religious belief. The reformed epistemologist's tact is not to claim that he or she can 'prove' the existence of God; it is, rather, simply to argue that apparent counters or objections to God's existence can be challenged and refuted, and (sometimes) that 'evidence' can be given to show that philosophical positions consistent with religious belief – such as anti-naturalism are more plausible than the views of their (predominantly) non-religious opponents. In short, while there can be no demonstration or proof of religious beliefs, Reformed epistemologists hold that it can be reasonable to believe in God, just as it is reasonable for us to hold common sense beliefs, such as the belief that there are other minds.In this paper, I want to focus my comments on the version of Reformed Epistemology that one finds in the work of the American philosopher, Alvin Plantinga (b. 1932). The author of some ten books and over a hundred articles,[1313] Plantinga is well known for both his work in epistemology and his writings in the philosophy of religion. He is the author of *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000)[14], which extends his earlier work both on warrant (in epistemology) and on the defence of religious belief. Specifically, I want to examine the reasons Plantinga (and other Reformed epistemologists) give to show why believers do not need to have evidence for their beliefs and why sometimes it is reasonable to hold beliefs for which there is no evidence. But I also want to look at Plantinga's views on the nature and meaningfulness of religious belief. While Reformed epistemologists generally do not explicitly deal with this issue, their account of the relation of religious belief and evidence clearly presupposes that religious belief is meaningful, and so it is important to see what exactly it is.

2.'Basic' Belief

Why does Plantinga think that it is sometimes reasonable to hold beliefs for which there is no evidence? This is because some of our beliefs – including religious beliefs – are what Plantinga calls "basic."[15] On Plantinga's view, a "basic belief" is a belief that one does not accept on the basis of other (propositions or) beliefs.

Consider, for example, beliefs such as "2 + 1 = 3" or "There is a computer monitor in front of me" or (when I read these words to an audience) "Those listening

13 For a complete bibliography, see *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, James F.Sennett (ed.), Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998. A curriculum vitae, to 1996, is available at http://www.id.ucsb.edu/fscf/library/plantinga/cv.html

14 Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

15 *Return to Reason*, op. cit, p. 131.

to this lecture have minds." Plantinga argues that these beliefs are basic – we do not reason to them on the basis of other beliefs – and it is 'reasonable' to believe them.

But saying that a belief is 'basic' is not to say that it is groundless. The 'ground' of a belief is what *justifies* me in holding it – and this, Plantinga says, is the corresponding "appropriate" "experience."[16] Thus, I see an audience in front of me, and the corresponding belief is then "triggered" in me. I find myself having the belief that there is an audience *without there being any inference* from the perception. There is no question of one belief providing evidence for another.[17] Or again, a friend remarks to me that "The bridge over Rights River has been washed out," and I find myself believing it immediately. Here, I have beliefs without there being any *inference* from testimony,[18] and so again there is no question of one belief providing evidence for another.[1919] On this account, "the overwhelming majority of our beliefs are in fact basic."[20]

To repeat, the 'ground' of my belief – what *justifies* me in holding it – is the appropriate *experience*. This is *not* "evidence" – I do not *infer* my belief from other beliefs based on perception, memory, or testimony; I just *have* the belief. So, to say that one has no empirical evidence for a belief is not to say that it is groundless.

Plantinga admits, however, that an experience alone, perceptual or otherwise, is not sufficient to say one's belief is justified; this is only a *necessary* condition, and "some further condition…is clearly necessary."[21] Basic beliefs must be "defeasible"; It is possible then that some basic beliefs may be shown to be false. And so, Plantinga seeks to explain what this further condition is – i.e., what makes a basic belief a *properly* basic belief.

3.'Properly Basic' Belief

Consider a belief such as 'God exists.' Reformed epistemologists hold that such a belief is (properly) basic. Plantinga says that there are many conditions that might trigger a "disposition" to believe in God.[22] For example, upon reading the Bible, I

16 "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?," pp. 44-45.

17 See *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 175: A perceptual belief "will ordinarily be *basic*, in the sense that it is not accepted on the evidential basis of other propositions.")

18 *Return to Reason*, op.cit., p. 131; "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?," pp. 420-421.

19 See "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?," p. 44.

20 *Return to Reason*, op. cit., p. 131.

21 "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?," pp. 45-46.

22 Ibid., p. 46.

may have the sense that God is speaking to me. Or again, upon doing something wrong, I may feel guilty and form the belief that God disapproves of what I have done.[23] (Plantinga admits that, strictly speaking, the proposition "God exists" is not basic; in the preceding examples what is basic are such propositions as "God is speaking to me" or "God disapproves of what I have done." Nevertheless, he says that each of these propositions self-evidently entails that God exists[24], and, consequently, that there is no harm in saying that "God exists" is a basic belief.) Now, since this belief is immediately "triggered" in the believer by this experience, *and* if the believer has no reason to disbelieve the reliability of this experience (e.g., one such reason would be that she has been given a hallucinogenic drug), Plantinga would say that she may hold that this belief is "entirely proper and rational"[25] and that it is "justified"[26] – it is properly basic with respect to *justification.*

Plantinga suggests that to wait for (further) evidence – e.g., arguments and proofs – and, until then, to accept God 'tentatively,' is a sign of *immature* belief.[27] So, for Plantinga, we can be justified in holding basic beliefs even if they are not proven or demonstrated, and this involves no weakening of one's wish to be reasonable. In *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga adds that a belief can be "properly basic with respect to warrant."[28] He does so, it would seem, in order to address a charge made against his earlier essays that he had yet "to set out his own criteria for properly basic beliefs."[29]

Justification, then, is distinct from warrant. To be justified, is to be "within one's epistemic rights and also … being epistemic responsible with respect to belief formation"[30]; it is normally a property of persons. On the other hand, a belief – not a person – can be *warranted* "only if it is produced by cognitive faculties that are functioning properly" and in the "way they are *supposed* to work"[31] – that is "according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth."[32]

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23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., p. 47.

25 Ibid., p. 50.

26 *Return to Reason*, op. cit., p. 147.

27 See "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?," p. 27.

28 *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 178ff.

29 See *Michael Peterson [et al.], *Reason and Religious Belief: an introduction to the philosophy of religion*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 125; cf. *Return to Reason*, op. cit., p. 143.

30 *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 100.

31 Ibid., pp. 153-154.

32 Ibid., p. 156.

But even in *Warranted Christian Belief*, the criteria for warrant are not specified[33]; all that Plantinga says is that we have a belief-producing faculty (that Plantinga calls, following Calvin, the "*sensus divinitatis*") – that, "when it functions properly, it ordinarily does produce true beliefs about God," and that "These beliefs therefore meet the conditions for warrant," and may even "constitute knowledge."[34]

4. Anticipated Objections

Plantinga anticipates (two) (obvious) objections to his view.

The first objection is that Plantinga has given us *no* good reason to hold that religious beliefs are properly basic. It seems that what counts as a 'basic' belief here is entirely relative to the individual – i.e., a belief is basic or properly basic only in relation to how it is "triggered" in a particular person. But this, a critic would say, is too subjective a standard of 'reasonability,' for the focus is not on whether the belief is true, but on how it arises and on whether the believer has any grounds for not believing it. It seems possible that for *one* person a belief – say, a belief about an event like the resurrection of Lazarus – might be basic and reasonable (in the way in which Plantinga describes); for another, it might be based on evidence and not basic at all; whereas for yet another person, holding the belief could be entirely at odds with the functioning of the rest of his belief-producing faculties – and so would not be warranted in holding it.

Besides, if a particular belief is properly basic, shouldn't all sane, intelligent, honest individuals see it as properly basic? Consider the case of a person giving a lecture (like this one). On Plantinga's view, the belief that there is an audience in front of me is a basic belief. Now, wouldn't all sane, honest, individuals at the lecture have the *same* basic belief? The answer seems obviously 'Yes.' But let's take a different example. Suppose two people hear a passage from the Bible. One person may immediately believe that God is speaking to him or her, but the other person might not believe this. Or suppose that two people take a walk at night and both look up at the starry heavens. One person may 'think' or 'feel' that there is a creator of all this, but the other person may not. Doesn't this difference in response count against the believer's beliefs being properly 'basic,' or, at least, provide good grounds *for holding* the view that such beliefs are *not* properly basic? In short, isn't the fact that other well-informed, sane, honest, intelligent people

33 Ibid., pp. 178-179.

34 Ibid., p. 179.

do not have such a belief, in the same situation, a reason for thinking my belief is not properly basic – just as knowing that I had been given a hallucinogenic drug is such a reason?

Plantinga replies that what will count as a properly 'basic' belief here depends on the individual, but that there is no *prima facie* reason why it must agree with someone else's basic beliefs. The "mere fact of disagreement" with another person does not "constitute a reason against [one's] belief."[35] Sane, honest individuals sometimes disagree about moral beliefs, but the mere fact that they disagree doesn't prove that none of these individuals is justified in holding the moral beliefs he or she does.

Moreover, Plantinga says that it *is* possible that a person whose cognitive faculties are in good working order *will* in fact spontaneously form properly basic religious beliefs. The fact that someone does not spontaneously form such beliefs is not evidence against its 'basicality,' but could be evidence that that person's cognitive faculties are not in good working order. Here, Plantinga reminds us of Calvin's view that God has created a disposition in humanity to believe in Him in the appropriate circumstances.[36] Plantinga refers to this at length in *Warranted Christian Belief*. This disposition, however, may be (has been?) weakened by sin, *and,* therefore, in the appropriate circumstances, belief may not be triggered. So again, the fact that others do not respond in the same way to an event or an experience does not count against the believer's response – i.e. belief – as being proper.

Finally, Plantinga suggests that the standard for 'proper basicality' is not an entirely subjective one. He seems to acknowledge that the character of a belief as properly basic does count on some intersubjective criteria – namely, on those of the religious community to which the believer belongs,[37] which set conditions not only for the discernment of the actual source of the belief (e.g., God), but of general defeasibility.

A second objection that Plantinga considers is that his theory proves too much – we might take this objection to be that, if his account of 'basic belief' is correct, then *all* sorts of beliefs would be basic, and that all basic beliefs, of whatever sort, would be (equally) 'reasonable' – including ones we might generally think

35 *Return to Reason*, op. cit., p. 153.

36 "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?," p. 46.

37 Ibid., p. 50.

to be false or silly. (Plantinga refers to the 'belief' of the character, Linus, in the American comic strip, 'Peanuts,' that every Hallowe'en, a 'Great Pumpkin' rises out of the pumpkin patch and goes out to deliver gifts to all boys and girls – a belief obviously analogous to Santa Claus.). In other words, the critic says, wouldn't belief in the 'Great Pumpkin' or in 'Santa Claus' – or any similar belief – also be a basic belief?[38]

Plantinga denies any suggestion that this example could pose a problem for the Reformed epistemologist. His view is that there simply is "no Great Pumpkin and no natural tendency to accept beliefs about the Great Pumpkin."[39]

What is interesting here is that Plantinga rejects this criticism, not because a belief in the Great Pumpkin isn't (or couldn't be) a basic belief – but that it couldn't be *properly* basic. At first glance, it would seem as if Plantinga denies that beliefs about the Great Pumpkin are even basic – because they don't arise 'naturally' or because there just isn't a Great Pumpkin. And to this Plantinga's critic would no doubt reply that this is simply question-begging – that while a belief in the Great Pumpkin may not be basic for, say, a Christian, there is no *a priori* reason why it might *not* be basic for someone else.

But note that Plantinga goes on to say that it is an "irrational basic belief" – i.e., which suggests that it *could be* a 'basic belief' but simply couldn't be a *properly* basic one, presumably because there are grounds that give us reason not to trust such an experience. In other words, his objection is not that there are no appropriate conditions that 'trigger' belief in the Great Pumpkin, but that we have grounds for believing that these conditions are epistemically problematic.

With these objections – which he takes to be fundamental objections – out of the way, Plantinga concludes that he has given us reasons for thinking that at least some religious beliefs are properly basic beliefs, and that such a conclusion doesn't permit other, putatively spurious, beliefs as 'properly basic.' He also holds that failure to believe certain religious beliefs (because of some "cognitive malfunction") can even be irrational.[40]

5. Meaning and Truth

Given this account of properly basic belief, we have some sense of what

38 Ibid., pp. 50-51.

39 "Reason and Belief in God," op. cit., p. 78.

40 *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 186.

Plantinga thinks is the relation between religious belief and evidence. But what can we say about Plantinga's views on the meaningfulness and the truth of religious belief?[41]

Plantinga does not spend much time on the question of the meaningfulness of religious belief. He takes the question to be really a criticism of his view, and he seems to hold that objections to or concerns about 'meaningfulness' are primarily problems dealing with what terms or beliefs refer to. At the beginning of *Warranted Christian Belief*, he discusses the issue of 'meaningfulness' by examining claims made, primarily, by Immanuel Kant and, to a lesser extent, by Gordon Kaufman[42] – and it is a discussion that eventually leads him into an examination of the recent views of John Hick (which I will discuss in lecture five).

Plantinga considers the following possible objection to the meaningfulness of religious belief:

> The sentences Christians use to express (as they think) their beliefs, do not really express the kinds of propositions or thoughts Christians think they express. Indeed, perhaps, they don't express any propositions or thoughts at all but are a sort of disguised nonsense: they *look* as if they express propositions but in fact do not.[43]

Plantinga goes on to discuss, then, whether reference to God is possible – maintaining that Kant is at least ambiguous on this matter, and that Kaufman has no good reason for denying that reference is possible.

Interestingly, however, Plantinga does *not* discuss whether or how believers get such reference right. In other words, even if we grant that, in uttering a religious belief, believers are referring to some thing, Plantinga does not explain how that reference is made, nor what exactly is referred to. Moreover – and more importantly – Plantinga does not say anything about how to determine the *sense* of religious beliefs. It is clear that Plantinga rejects the solution of D.Z. Phillips – accusing Phillips of a "positivism" about religious belief – but he spells out neither his alternative views nor his objections to Phillips's view, referring the reader to an article by Nicholas Wolterstorff on Wittgensteinian Fideism that

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41 See Ibid., p. 34 n. 2, and Ch. 1.

42 [42]See Gordon Kaufman, *God the Problem*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972; *The Theological Imagination: constructing the concept of God*, Philadelphia: Westminister Press, 1981

43 *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 7.

is (or at least was at the time of the publication of *Warranted Christian Belief*) unpublished![44]

Presumably, Plantinga's position would be that we can find out the meaning (i.e., the sense or connotation) of a religious belief in much the same way as we find out the meaning of *any* belief – through how such beliefs are used, by ostension, by explication, through the gradual assimilation of a stipulative definition into a culture, and so on. And a meaningful belief would have to fit at least certain general conditions for meaningfulness – that it not be incoherent or self contradictory, that it be able to have a truth value, and so on.

This leads to the question of what makes religious beliefs *distinctively* religious. One might think that this will have something to do with what or who is being referred to in the belief. But in fact Plantinga's position on this is not clear, and so it too is a question that requires further investigation. Now, if Plantinga wishes to say that religious belief(s) can be meaningful and true, it must be clear what makes a belief a religious belief. Again, while Plantinga says little on this, we can infer some necessary characteristics from his comments. While such beliefs are not, on Plantinga's account, scientific hypotheses (e.g., they do not depend on propositional evidence), they look like scientific hypotheses – they are propositional and descriptive in form and in character. Moreover, the examples that Plantinga gives of religious beliefs are all expressed in the form of propositions. And they seem to have many of the characteristics of scientific hypotheses or beliefs – for example, the fact that these beliefs are "defeasible" and may be shown to be false (e.g., as we have seen, even if a belief is "triggered" in the believer by his or her experience, if the believer has reason to doubt the reliability of this experience, such a belief would be irrational). It would seem, then, that our religious beliefs are descriptive, cognitive, falsifiable propositions. And therefore we have a propositional account of religious belief.

Finally, Plantinga's view on what it means to say that a religious belief is *true* – given his account of basic belief—is even less straightforward.

It seems to go almost without saying that, to be true, a belief must be at least cognitively meaningful – that is, one must know what it is that that belief affirms or denies – and so, plausibly, it must be descriptive in some way. Moreover, for Plantinga, 'truth' (or at least knowledge of a proposition and, therefore, truth) is what one gets if one's cognitive faculties are functioning properly (though

44 See Ibid., p. 8 n. 12.

he thinks that we can get truth in other ways). But what *makes* a belief true is not that it arose in a certain way, or just that it fits with other true beliefs, but presumably that it accurately represents what is in fact the case – that the belief corresponds to reality – a correspondence view.

Plantinga's Conclusion

As we have seen, then, Plantinga suggests that, in judging the rationality – or, better, the reasonableness of beliefs, we need to enlarge or broaden our concepts or reasonability and rationality. It is, he thinks, appropriate to speak of the rationality *qua* reasonableness of belief without it being necessary to provide the kind of evidence or philosophical demonstration demanded by evidentialism and, specifically, classical foundationalism. If we broaden our understanding of rationality, we can better see the reasonableness of *religious* belief, and better explain the relation of religious belief to reason and evidence. We will find (Plantinga holds) not only that the case *against* Christianity is weak, but that the plausibility of Christian religious belief is at least on a par with other non-religious basic beliefs. What distinguishes the religious believer from the non-believer, then, is fundamentally that they have different basic beliefs.[45]

Some Objections

Not surprisingly, a number of objections have been raised to Plantinga's account, and in the next few pages I want to discuss three sets of objections. What is particularly interesting, however, is not so much Plantinga's responses to these criticisms, but what he takes for granted or does not explore.

Objections on 'basic belief'

Consider what Plantinga has been primarily concerned to argue: first, that religious belief is (properly) basic and, second, that for the believer to accept God 'tentatively' – perhaps in the sense in which William Paley or William Clifford might speak of 'tentative' belief[46] – is a sign of immature faith. A number of criticisms have been raised concerning Plantinga's notion of 'basic belief.' Let me begin by noting two.

45 "Is Belief in God Rational?", op. cit., p. 27.

46 See Paley and Clifford on tentative belief.

The first criticism is that Plantinga has not provided a sufficiently clear account of 'basic belief.' After all, what *are* the 'basic' beliefs of religious belief? And isn't it just implausible that most of our religious beliefs are basic? Most beliefs simply aren't 'basic' in the lives of believers and, arguably, couldn't be so.

Are many beliefs 'basic'? Which ones are basic, and why?

Some Reformed epistemologists, Plantinga included, suggest that most or all religious beliefs are (properly) basic beliefs – but this seems extremely implausible. To see why, consider certain non- religious beliefs, and compare them with common religious beliefs.

'The world exists' is a basic belief and, plausibly, a properly basic belief. But 'The world came into existence in 4004 BCE' is clearly different. Is it properly basic? One may hear such a belief and believe, but surely this isn't enough to see that we should see it as basic. Kelly Clark writes that while one would not object to a scientist having 'There is a material world' as a basic belief, one would properly censure a scientist if he accepted '$E = mc^2$' as a 'basic belief.'[47] Shouldn't an analogous case hold true of religious belief? So, even if we grant that 'God exists' is a basic belief, what about 'God is immutable' or 'Jesus is the unique Redeemer' or 'The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son'? These latter beliefs are the results of theological or philosophical speculation. Wouldn't we censure a theologian or a philosopher – or any intelligent and well-informed believer – if she simply accepted certain beliefs without any additional investigation?

Besides, in any event, it seems plausible that, for many believers, while they may have these beliefs, they are not basic, but actually *based* on other beliefs (e.g., 'That's what I was taught in church' or 'That's what a priest told me' and so on).

Unfortunately, neither Plantinga nor the other principal Reformed epistemologists seem to address the question of the difference between basic religious beliefs and religious beliefs that are not basic.[4848] In fact, there is nothing in the

47 *Return to Reason*, op. cit., p. 132. It is, however, not clear how Clark can consistently maintain this. Does the fact that one can, later in life, prove how or why a belief is true make it any less a basic belief?

48 Kai Nielsen raises another objection to Plantinga's analysis. Nielsen objects to that analogy that Plantinga gives between basic beliefs like "The earth exists" and religious beliefs like "God exists." According to Nielsen, Plantinga simply doesn't see that the first, unlike the second, simply isn't the object of a rational doubt. (See *God, Scepticism, and Modernity*, op. cit., pp. 7-9)

beliefs themselves that makes a particular religious belief basic or not; the difference seems to lie in the relation to who holds the belief (as we saw when Clark writes that 'E=mc^2' may be a basic belief for a layperson, but not for a physicist). And so it seems that what makes a belief (properly) 'basic' is not just how it arises and whether there are conditions that would lead us to think that this process is defective. Its 'basicality' also depends on who believes it and whether that person *should* be expected to have evidence for such beliefs.

Second, *what* exactly is the content of a 'basic belief'? When believers utter the words "There is a God," how are others to understand them? Are believers describing something, as uttering a proposition, or are they instead expressing the 'state of mind' they are in, or what?

Consider one of Plantinga's examples, cited earlier. When a believer reads the Bible and 'hears' something, does she believe 'that God is speaking to her' or is it just that she 'hears' God speaking? The difference is important, for the former is a proposition and the latter an experience. Moreover, what is it that is supposed to be 'triggered' in that person by the experience? Is it a proposition, a 'state' of believing, or is it a (pre-existing?) disposition to believe? One has the impression that Plantinga might say it is the last. But, if this is so, *what* is the person disposed to believe? The proposition that God is speaking to her? Or the proposition that God exists, or (if she already does believe in God) the content of the 'message'? Although Plantinga does not say so explicitly, what appears to happen in the cases that he provides is not that certain descriptive or cognitive 'beliefs-that' are triggered in the person, but that a certain epistemological condition occurs, namely, hearing and believing.

But if this is so, what, then, has happened to the 'propositional' account of religious belief? Is his earlier analysis of religious belief (i.e., that it is a belief that certain propositions about God are true) consistent with the view suggested in his explanation of how belief arises? Plantinga (and Reformed epistemologists in general) give no clear answer to the question of whether religious beliefs are propositions about certain states of affairs or whether they are 'states of mind.'

There is, I would argue, another problem that must be taken into consideration when talking about a belief being properly basic. Recall Plantinga's view. Our beliefs, as Plantinga points out, arise in many different ways. Our perceptual beliefs are 'triggered' by what we perceive or, more broadly, by our experiences. Or I may have a memory of something having happened, and therefore I (now) just

have the belief that it really did happen. Other beliefs arise through what others say, though they are (Plantinga says) no less basic (i.e., non-inferential). Thus, a person says, 'The river has washed out the bridge' and I (immediately) believe that the river has washed it out. (That is, there is no inference here from a proposition about, say, the reliability of that person, to my believing what that person says.) The mechanism for basic belief is something like "I hear it, therefore I believe it."

Now, when it comes to perceptual beliefs this mechanism or process is plausibly pretty much how things work. In fact, the beliefs generated are often *properly* basic, and we generally act as if they are – unless, of course, we have some reason to believe that our perception is unreliable.

But is the place of evidence as restricted as Plantinga suggests? Consider the following perceptual belief: I drive through the countryside at night in winter, and think I see buildings beside the road, but 'know' that it can only be snow-covered stands of trees. I 'see' but I know I shouldn't *believe*. My 'triggered' beliefs, therefore, are determined not to be properly basic. Or again, generally, we trust our memory – but (at least, as we get older) seem to be aware that we may not have gotten things quite right. So whether our memory-based beliefs should be taken to be properly basic is, given the recognition of our fallibility here, problematic – we think twice, ask our friends, check our notes, etc. And, finally, classifying a belief as properly basic doesn't seem anywhere near as 'automatic' a process – and certainly not as reliable a process – when it comes to what I *hear* from others (i.e., testimony). This is not to say that I may not find myself believing certain things when told them, but much more comes into play when I want to determine whether a belief is *properly* basic. For example, if a notorious liar tells me that my Dean is having an affair with another man, I hear, but (likely) don't believe; if the Dean were to tell me, I hear, and (likely) do believe. What is different in the two cases is that there is additional knowledge – and at least one judgement – that come into play. Furthermore, for any of my beliefs (beyond ordinary perceptual beliefs) to be properly basic – where I have to consider whether there may be some reason that I have got things wrong – it seems I would have to have a good deal of knowledge about myself (e.g., my tendency for credulity), about others, and about the world, and which I must take into account as relevant evidence. The believer of whom Plantinga speaks must, therefore, meet the condition of one who has this knowledge and can make mature decisions based on it.

A further problem with this notion of 'basic belief' is that, if one adopts

Plantinga's analysis, a basic belief is 'basic', not simply in relation to a person, but to a specific situation – and this leads to a paradox.

Suppose that, on reading the Bible, the following belief is triggered in me: 'God is speaking to me.' Here we have what Plantinga would say is an example of a basic belief. Since this statement presupposes the proposition 'God exists,' then (Plantinga holds) I can say that 'God exists' is also a basic belief. But suppose that I already believe in God, and that I have believed in God after having reflected for many years on the teleological argument – or on other philosophical arguments. Thus, it would seem that my *belief* 'God exists,' is both a basic belief (because 'triggered') and a belief founded upon arguments or proofs – which would seem to be contradictory.

Now, to avoid this paradox, one might say a number of things. First, one could say that the notion of a basic belief does not describe a *kind* of belief but, rather, describes a relation between a proposition and the subjective attitude of a person in a *specific* situation – the relation of 'believing basically.' But then there are arguably no basic beliefs as such. Or one might say that it is 'believing, in this way, *now*' that makes it basic – and *not* the proposition expressing this belief. But, as in (b) above, both of these options lead to the conclusion that 'basic beliefs' are not propositions but 'states of mind' or (perhaps) attitudes.

There is one final comment I wish to make here concerning 'basic belief' and the relation to evidence or argument.

Plantinga's account of the relation between evidence and religious belief suggests that there generally is *no* such relation. (And it is no doubt in part because of this that Plantinga remarks that, for the believer to accept God 'tentatively' where one lacks proof, is a sign of immature faith.) But this is surely question begging. Plantinga gives no argument at all for saying that to be tentative in holding what one might have spontaneously arrived at is, in any way, problematic. In fact, it might be good sense – if one doesn't believe everything Plantinga says. But even if it *isn't* required that one be tentative, it doesn't follow that refusing to accede to such a position makes one's belief 'immature.' In fact, since there are plausibly many non-basic religious beliefs (just as there are many non-basic scientific beliefs), the right response would seem to be that in such cases belief should be open to additional investigation; thus, the role of evidence in the holding of such a hypothesis or belief seems clearly à *propos* here.

If the preceding comments on basic belief are correct, then holding a supposedly or potentially basic religious belief tentatively would seem to be just as appropriate as holding a scientific belief tentatively. And this would have a further consequence – it would confirm, contra Plantinga, that some relation to evidence is important for religious belief – because it *does* provide a necessary context and backdrop for at least the many (and central) non-basic beliefs of Christianity.

Objections about religious belief, truth, and the relevance of argument or proof.

A second major concern with Plantinga's view is that it does not seem to get the relation between religious belief and truth quite right. There are several questions that might be raised here.

First, does Plantinga's view provide a means of arriving at religious truth? It seems that in saying that a belief is basic – even properly basic – we are saying nothing about whether it is true or false. Since the notion of 'basic belief' reflects only the way in which one acquires a belief, if we follow Plantinga's analysis, it would seem that someone could think himself justified in believing something that is false.[4949] For example, given my intimate knowledge of a friend (e.g., that I know him to be an intelligent, cautious, sober-minded individual), I may believe (justifiably) that what he is telling me is true – even though it is in fact false. Now, when a believer says that he believes in God, he wants to say *much more* than that this belief is, for him, basic and that he is (therefore) reasonable (or not unreasonable) in holding it. He wants to say that *what* he believes is true.

Perhaps Plantinga might reply that the existence of God makes so much of a difference to the way the world is, that our properly functioning cognitive faculties could not fail to be aware of this – i.e., that they could not lead us to the belief that God does not exist, when God does. And so, while following the process he discusses doesn't *make* the belief true, our properly functioning faculties cannot lead us to a conclusion such as 'God does not exist' – or to the conclusion that the proposition 'God exists' is false.

Thus, in this indirect way, we can get to the truth of a belief.

Nevertheless, this still does not show that the belief is true and, in any event, it presupposes that properly functioning cognitive faculties have such a character that removes the possibility of making a mistake on certain matters. And while there does seem to be a case for this when it comes to basic beliefs about the

49 See *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 187-188.

world, there is no reason given to extend this to religious belief and particularly to belief in God. Any argument of this nature is highly dubious.

There are other problems on this point. A further difficulty that arises for Plantinga and other Reformed epistemologists here is whether we could ever say that even (properly) basic religious beliefs are true. To say that a belief is true would seem to entail that such a belief accurately describes 'what is the case.' But if this is so, then one would have to be able to show this – and it is not clear that this can be done without giving what would count as evidence – and this is precisely what the non-evidential character of 'basic belief' says the believer need not do. Now, as suggested above, a Reformed epistemologist might say that we have no reason to doubt that properly basic beliefs accurately describe what is and, hence, they can by default be said to be 'true.' Or she might say that such beliefs are reliable and, hence, true because of how they arise – i.e., the immediacy of the experience that grounds and triggers them and the absence of 'defeaters.'

Of these options, it seems that Plantinga's response is most likely to be the latter. Thus, what characterises a belief as basic is that it is 'triggered' by an experience and, because it is 'triggered' by an experience, it is (at least) *prima facie* true.

But this leaves out an important point: *in whom* is the belief triggered and *for whom* is it grounded? The fact that one person has a (properly) basic belief in God is not obviously a reason why another should call it 'basic' or say it is true. So is the *truth* of a belief be relative to a believer in the same way in which its character as 'basic' is? Such an account of truth, as we saw in the case of Wittgensteinian fideism, seems dangerously close to relativism, if not subjectivism.

Third, Plantinga's understanding of belief and, particularly, his implied standard of rationality, seem to overlook the fact that belief takes place in a social context, and that our standards for reasonability and truth reflect this. This is a point that is suggested also by Steven Wykstra.[50] According to Wykstra, to be 'reasonable,' believers must have – or, at least, must think there is, *evidence* for their beliefs. Even if a belief arises or is triggered 'spontaneously,' to be rational in holding it, the truth of that belief has to have some support in the community or in a larger discourse – in other words, it is necessary that one believes that

50 Steven Wykstra, "Toward a Sensible Evidentialism: On the Notion of Needing Evidence," in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 2nd. ed., William Rowe and William Wainwright (eds.), Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1989, pp. 426-437.

someone has evidence. What it means to say that something is true, the standards or criteria for truth, and so on, are features that require reference to a (linguistic or cultural) community, and it has at least to be rooted in a discourse. Consequently, even if one agrees that a basic belief is not *founded* on evidence, it does not follow that evidence is not relevant.

A fourth question that arises is whether Plantinga is right in his view that we do not get to 'true (religious) belief(s)' through proof – and that we should not think we can.

For some time – and still – Plantinga has been deeply suspicious of the possibility of proving religious belief. Plantinga allows that philosophy can remove (intellectual) obstacles to (Christian) religious belief,[5151] but he denies that it can show that Christianity, or religious belief in general, is true.

Admittedly, Plantinga now seems to recognise – though he long did not – that even if authors, such as St Thomas Aquinas, propose that one can give philosophical arguments that show the existence and the analogical attributes of God, it does not follow that the reasonability of the belief (or the believer) *rests* on having such arguments or that 'natural theology' is necessarily related to classical evidentialism. (And so we see for the first time, in *Warranted Christian Belief*, that Plantinga has changed his view about whether the tradition of Christian apologetics is 'evidentialist' and 'foundationalist.') But Plantinga's openness to Aquinas – so much so that he now writes of the "Aquinas/Calvin" model – does not go very far when it comes to the matter of the relation of proof to religious belief.

This 'suspicion,' found in Plantinga and throughout Reformed epistemology, is at the very least odd. Consider, for example, the highly apologetic character of Plantinga's work, especially of *Warranted Christian Belief*, and of the writings of other Reformed epistemologists. The lengthy tradition of preaching and of apologetics also suggests that, for those who engage in these practices at least, there is a starting point that is open to believers and non-believers alike, and from which one can conclude to at least some religious beliefs. (Indeed, one might even say that *this* is a 'basic belief.') Moreover, believers say that their beliefs are not simply reasonable, but 'true,' and it is a matter of concern to many believers that someone should be in a position to show that their belief is true. (And many believers have confidence that someone *can* do this.) Furthermore, if believers are to say that one religion is *preferable* to, or superior to, another, it is because they

51 See *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 499.

hold that there is some common ground between them. (If there were no common ground – or at least, some ground perceived to be common – there would not even be a base from which one could begin to speak of the differences between religions, let alone preferring one over another.) The fact that traditional apologetics has encountered difficulties or does not always succeed does not justify a scepticism about it, and it is hard to see how one can avoid the problems raised above if one starts with the anti-foundationalist approach of these 'Reformed epistemologists.'

There is, perhaps, a fifth question that one might raise – one that does not deal so much with the issue of religious truth, but with the concern expressed just above – the role of evidence in religious belief.

Suppose that Plantinga is right that believers have 'basic beliefs,' that their cognitive faculties are generally working well, that their beliefs are *properly* basic, and that – in the absence of possible objections (so-called 'defeaters') – they take it that their beliefs *are* true. How Plantinga can deal with other 'basic' religious beliefs, acquired in the same way, whose truth *contradicts* that of monotheism or Christianity? (e.g., A Hindu reads the Upanishads and believes that all differences are unreal. As this conflicts with the Christian view that there are real, fundamental, differences among people and among people and things, the Hindu concludes that Christian theism is false.) Plantinga's comments on pluralism aside (e.g., where he notes that the fact of the plurality of religions is not a sufficient ground to lead me to question or to change my beliefs), surely there is a role for reason and argument here—and, thus, this is one way in which argument is relevant to the truth of religious belief.

Problems in the concept of religious belief

While the preceding—and many other[52] – problems have been raised with Plantinga's analysis of 'basic belief' and the relation to evidence and proof, what seems to lie at the root of them, is Plantinga's view of what religious beliefs are and what they mean – and his view is a problematic one.

52 Some recent articles include: David Basinger, "Plantinga, Pluralism and Justified Religious Belief," *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 8 (1991), pp. 67-80; William P. Alston, "Plantinga's Epistemology Of Religious Belief" in *Alvin Plantinga*, James E. Tomberlin (ed), Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985, pp. 289-311; Bruno Niederbacher, "Zur Epistemologie des theistischen Glaubens," *Theologie und Philosophie*, Vol. 74 (1999), pp.1-16; Stephen Maitzen, "God and Other Theoretical Entities," *Topoi*, Vol. 14 (1995), pp. 123- 134; James A. Keller, "Reflections On A Methodology For Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 5 (1988), pp. 144-158.

Now, it is clear that Plantinga has correctly identified some aspects of religious belief that escaped Phillips and Nielsen; he has clearly noted *why* a person might believe that it is reasonable to have faith, and he has given some useful arguments against some of the objections raised to religious belief.

Nevertheless, Plantinga makes two principal assumptions in his account.

First, Plantinga simply assumes that his general understanding of belief can legitimately be extended to *religious* belief and, second, he takes for granted that he has given an adequate description of the nature of religious beliefs (e.g., what it is that makes a religious belief distinctively religious). But neither assumption is justified.

The first point to be made, then, is that Plantinga's view of (belief in) God is at best just one theory of how it works – and, arguably, not even the best theory, since it does not fully appreciate what has been noted in earlier lectures—that religious beliefs have a distinctive and privileged role in the believing of the religious believer.

As we have seen, Plantinga's own view about the nature of belief is the following: if we have a properly functioning cognitive faculty, in the appropriate circumstances we should get certain 'triggered' beliefs. But if we don't get a certain 'triggered' belief in the appropriate circumstances, the corresponding cognitive faculty must be malfunctioning. So, for example, suppose that there is a person standing at the back of a room – but, though looking straight at him, I don't see him. You would conclude my eyesight is bad – or that I don't have proper eyeglasses—since, unless some explanation of this kind were true, I should be able to see him. And similarly, on Plantinga's view, since God is everywhere, if I don't 'see' God (or have a belief in God), then my appropriate cognitive faculties (the *sensus divinitatis*) must be malfunctioning.

Of course, there could be other explanations for my inability to see something that others 'see.' First, it could be that others are mistaken – that their perceptual or cognitive faculties have them seeing things that *aren't* there. Or, second, it could be that my failure to see something is not because of any cognitive or perceptual failure, but just because 'coming to see' certain things requires something more than properly functioning faculties. (So, for example, my failure to see someone far off in the distance is not a fault of my faculties; it is no failure of my faculties if, in order to see him, I need to get a pair of binoculars.)

Plantinga suggests that there is generally (though, admittedly, not exclusively) one way of coming to beliefs – that is, through the proper functioning of a faculty. And, indeed, it may be that my failing to see something at a distance is due to some malfunction – my eyesight is bad, and I need glasses. But it may also be that there is no malfunction at all, and that I need *something more*, e.g., binoculars.

In short, what I am suggesting here is that the analogy between perceptual beliefs and religious belief is assumed, and not proven. There may be something which we need in order to have (or to see the truth of) religious beliefs – something which we do not in fact *naturally* have – and that is faith. The epistemology of religious belief may be more complex than Plantinga allows.

A second assumption that Plantinga has made, is that his account of the nature of religious belief is satisfactory. Yet Plantinga's account of basic belief and warrant may reflect a view – a distinctively Protestant Christian view – of religious belief. It focuses on sin, 'the fall,' and the corruption of the natural world (including human beings) that follows from it. Religious belief—including particular religious beliefs about God, God's nature, God's relation to creation, and so on – is, on most Protestant Christian views, something *natural* to human beings and that would occur if all our natural faculties were in good working order. But, interestingly, Plantinga has attempted to pursue the discussion of such belief quite independently of the key notion of 'faith.' (I do not mean to suggest that Plantinga ignores the issue of faith; he discusses it, but it is not obvious that he properly recognises its role.)

Now what exactly does being a believer involve? [Presumably, it involves having religious beliefs and, generally, religious belief – i.e., believe *in* God. And what does believing in God mean?] For Plantinga, it certainly means having a belief that there is a God and (probably) a series of subsidiary beliefs – about God's nature (e.g., omnipotent, omniscient); about God as creator and designer and sustainer of all there is; about God as *my* creator and the one who has set out what I ought to do; about God as a being who loves and cares for all that he has made, and who desires that we know, love, serve, and worship him.[53] It also means having the belief that God has worked through people to make himself and his purposes known, and that this God is the God that Christians know and worship, who is revealed through his Son Jesus, and that this belief – or, perhaps,

53 See *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 188-189.

all the beliefs that are part of this belief in God – is guided and confirmed by the Holy Spirit.[5454]

Let's suppose that Plantinga's view about the proper functioning of faculties is correct, and suppose that my cognitive faculties (including my *sensus divinitatis*) are in good working order. What is supposed to happen when reading scripture or in looking up at the starry sky on a clear night? Plantinga's answer is that I 'see' (or have triggered in me) the belief 'There is a God.'

But this, I would argue, falls far short of what religious belief is about – namely, belief in God. At best, Plantinga's view would get us to 'belief-that there is a God.'

Belief in God, I would suggest, is more than what Plantinga's properly functioning '*sensus divinitatis*' – i.e., a properly functioning *natural* cognitive ability – can provide. 'Belief-in' God involves a trust in this being, a disposition to act in accord with the will of this being, and much more. And this is, for the believer *not* something that naturally arises (or could naturally arise), since it is – as Plantinga himself no doubt recognises – a 'gift.' So one who *has* this gift (and the graces that come with it) may then be able to see things that one without it cannot. And this not only explains why non-believers do not have these 'beliefs,' but why believers *can*.

Thus, faith or 'belief-in' – i.e., religious belief as such (and not particular religious beliefs)—has an important effect in the perception of believers. (Like binoculars), it allows them to see things that they wouldn't otherwise see. The failure to see or to have religious beliefs, then, is not due to cognitive failure or sin – but to the absence of a faculty which is not natural, but which we might acquire.

Now one might respond that all this does is give us just another theory of religious belief. Is there any reason to prefer the view just described to Plantinga's? I would say that there is. Plantinga's notion of 'basic belief' does not take account of certain essential aspects of fundamental religious beliefs. We can say that some beliefs are 'basic' (not in the Plantingan sense, which convcerns how one arrives at them, but in the sense that they have a fundamental place both in the noetic framework of the individual, and in relation to other religious beliefs). And it is this role, rather than the kind of experience that leads to such beliefs, that explains why believers are reluctant or refuse to abandon them. They constitute a *context* in which other beliefs are held.

54 Ibid., p. 490.

(As we have seen in the account of religious belief given by the fideists such as Phillips, 'basic' beliefs are fundamental in the sense that they are part of, or even constitute, the framework or noetic structure of the individual. Thus, a believer cannot even imagine giving up his religious beliefs any more than most people could imagine giving up their beliefs about the existence of the world. Phillips provides us with some guidance in how to distinguish between basic and non-basic beliefs, and allows that we can speak of a belief being 'basic,' regardless of the way in which one has acquired it. Plantinga's approach, however, does not seem to permit this analysis of religious belief.

But Plantinga might reply that he isn't concerned about this issue. He would likely note that he does acknowledge the place of 'faith' – that it is a "gift" – and that it is "a source of knowledge" – in fact "a source of knowledge that transcends ordinary perceptual faculties and cognitive processes."[5555] And he quotes Thomas Aquinas in support of this, where Aquinas defines 'faith' as a 'habitus.' So he would say that he does have room for 'belief-in' in his account. Moreover, Plantinga might add that he isn't worried about falling short of accounting for 'belief-in,' because many of his skeptical contemporaries don't even allow the 'belief-that.' These responses, however, fall short of a real answer to the preceding challenge. They ignore that there are some theological questions about whether religious beliefs are basic beliefs (e.g., Trinity, transubstantiation, etc.), as distinct from beliefs about certain beings or about moral standards.)

But even if Plantinga can deflect the preceding concern about 'belief-in' (or faith) as necessary to understanding the nature of religious belief, there is another (and, arguably, more important) reason for questioning Plantinga's account – and that is that Plantinga's view fails to explain what it is that gives religious beliefs their *explicitly* religious character. In other words, his use of the concept of religious belief does not take full account of how it is used in the utterances of those engaging in religious discourse.

So what makes one's religious beliefs religious?

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55 Ibid., p. 266; cf. the discussion of faith, pp. 244ff. In "Science and Christian Belief: Conflict or Concord" (see note 55 below), Plantinga also writes that "The Christian will think, of course, that indeed there is such a thing as faith, which is a special source of warranted belief. Her total epistemic base, therefore, includes all that we know by way of reason, but also all that we know by way of faith. Hence the scientific epistemic base is a part and only a part of the total Christian epistemic base."

Earlier in this lecture I said that it seemed that, if we look at Plantinga's earliest discussion of religious belief to *Warranted Christian Belief*, what makes a belief a *religious* belief is that it is a propositional belief whose content, directly or indirectly, refers to beings or events that have a role in a religious tradition or creed. Such a view is – for several reasons (as we saw in lecture 3, above) – unsatisfactory.

But Plantinga has recently suggested that there is more to a religious belief than his earlier work indicated. In an (as yet, to my knowledge) unpublished paper, "Science and Christian Belief: Conflict or Concord,"[5656] Plantinga addresses the question 'Is there a conflict between the teachings of current science and the teachings of the Christian faith?' He replies in the affirmative, but argues that this is not really a problem because the "decision as to what epistemic base is the right one to use in forming one's religious beliefs, and in particular, the decision as to whether or not faith can properly enter in […] is not itself a scientific decision." It is, he says, "a broadly religious decision." (And so, presumably, the choice between naturalism and non-naturalism is a religious decision!).

Now what does Plantinga mean by 'religious' here? Presumably he means something like 'reflecting one's final vocabulary' or 'reflecting one's fundamental commitments.' This, in turn, suggests that what makes a religious belief religious is not (as such) anything that it refers to, but that it is the expression of such a commitment. Propositions expressing such a commitment are religious, and they would be opposed to propositions expressing contrary commitments – which could be equally 'religious.'

Is this a plausible view of what it means to call a belief 'religious'? While it does fit with a colloquial sense of 'religion'—that our 'religion' is whatever we hold near and dear to us—it is not particularly informative, and it begs the question whether there is a real difference between religious beliefs and other basic (e.g., ideological) commitments.

Moreover, there is some question whether people see their religious beliefs in just this way. Is the 'choice' between naturalism and non-naturalism a *religious* one?

One way of understanding Plantinga's remarks is to see them as reflecting the distinction Moritz Schlick and Rudolf Carnap make between 'internal' and

56 A paper read at Concordia College, Edmonton, Alberta (May 2000) and at the University of Notre Dame, during the American Maritain Association meetings (October 2000).

'external' questions[57]—internal questions being about things that can be discussed within a discourse (which provides criteria for the truth and falsity of propositions) and external questions, being really about situations where one must choose whether to accept a scheme that posits a thing's existence. In this latter case, any choice—for the naturalist or for the non-naturalist – is 'pragmatic.' It is not something for which we could have reasons or evidence. (This is Carnap and Schlick's view at least.) This is not about a matter of fact (since such questions are *internal* questions).

For the moment, however, it is not at all clear where Plantinga can go on this issue of the nature of religious belief.

In the first place, it isn't clear that Plantinga's views are consistent. For, in this recent paper, he seems to be saying that there is something fundamental to religious belief that is not triggered, but is, rather, a 'decision.' What this means, on the Schlick-Carnap model that Plantinga appears to be adverting to, is that religious belief is not reasonable, and that what one opts for is neither true nor false. To see religious beliefs as "formed by" a decision in this way is not obviously consistent with seeing them as 'triggered.' And so there are at least tensions in his account.

In the second place, it isn't clear that Plantinga's views reflect what many believers—and, now, perhaps Plantinga himself—recognise as characteristic of religious belief. If religious belief is fundamentally propositional – that it simply involves affirming a number of propositions – then it is too narrow. So far as it means that religious belief is propositional in form and descriptive in character, it would allow virtually any proposition referring to beings or events that have a role in a religious tradition or creed to be described as a religious belief. (While religious belief – i.e., faith—does have a propositional element (sc., articles of faith), to emphasise this is to ignore not only commitment, but the framework character of belief (which is an epistemological matter) – and perhaps other dimensions. It also does not allow Plantinga to successfully distinguish itself from scientific belief.) But if, on the other hand, we take Plantinga now to see religious belief as the expression of a commitment, it seems to be too broad, for

57 Moritz Schlick, "Positivismus und Realismus," reprinted in *Gesammelte Aufsatze*, Wien, 1938; see also Rudolf Carnap, " Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, Vol. 4 (1950), pp. 20-40. Reprinted in the Supplement to *Meaning and Necessity: A Study in Semantics and Modal Logic*, enlarged edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956.

it doesn't adequately explain how religious belief is distinctively religious. As it stands, Plantinga doesn't bring these two dimensions together – which he must, in order to accurately portray what religious belief is and, by implication, the relation of religious belief to evidence.

In the third place, it isn't clear that Plantinga's views include all of the functions pf religious belief, that many believers ascribe to it. Like the empiricist view of Kai Nielsen, Plantinga's Reformed epistemology seems to ignore that religious utterances are at least sometimes expressive and performative, that their meaning is not purely cognitive or descriptive, and that the believer's 'basic beliefs' are more fundamental to her life than her basic scientific or logical beliefs. While there is a hint that Plantinga is coming to recognise some of these functions of religious belief more fully, he has yet to provide a clear and comprehensive statement of what religious belief is.

Conclusion

It must be admitted, then, that Plantinga does correctly identify some aspects of religious belief and how believers sometimes come to believe. We should also acknowledge that Plantinga has been able to show that many 'empiricist' challenges to religious belief are nowhere near as strong as some think. What Plantinga says against these challenges does tell us something about the relevance of evidence to religious belief. And, to be sure, some aspects of Plantinga's work are quite interesting and useful – such as the notion of 'basic belief' (which reminds us that we can be reasonable in accepting, without further argument, the evidence of our senses, of testimony, and of memory). Indeed, it is very likely true that Plantinga is not as far from traditional natural theology as he thinks.[5858] In fact, though Plantinga sees himself as responding to the evidentialism of William Clifford, some may find his own view to be not all that far from evidentialism. Recall the definition of "evidentialism": that 'theistic belief is rationally acceptable only if there is sufficient evidence for it' (i.e., only if one 'knows or rationally believes some other propositions which support the one in question, and believes the latter on the basis of the former).

And recall, as well, the normative character of evidentialism – i.e., there is a 'right way' and a 'wrong way' with respect to belief, just as there is with

58 See Hunter Brown, "Alvin Plantinga and Natural Theology," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 30 (1991), pp. 1-19.

actions. For Plantinga's own view would seem to be something like, 'theistic belief is rationally acceptable only if there is sufficient ground for it' and, while the ground is not propositional, the failure to have such a belief is a sign of a cognitive defect – a defect in the *sensus divinitatis*.

Still, there are a number of problems involved in turning to "Reformed epistemology" to provide a "justification" of religious belief, and a coherent account of belief in God.

To begin with, there are problems with such concepts as 'basic belief' – both as a description of religious belief and as not ever requiring a relation to evidence. When reformed epistemologists, like Plantinga, talk about religious belief, it seems that they end up talking about is the epistemological

condition of believing – which says little, if anything, about what it is that one believes (i.e., the belief that one has). But it is precisely this latter issue that must be addressed. Reformed epistemologists must give a more complete account of the descriptive and cognitive status of religious belief if they are to maintain that it is not dependent on propositional evidence and is different from scientific belief.

Moreover, such an account is essential if they are ever to show how religious beliefs might be true.

Moreover, there are deeper considerations concerning Plantinga's account of the nature of religious beliefs. Plantinga seems to misunderstand why non-believers don't 'see' religious belief, what is involved in the attitude of faith or trust that is characteristic of belief, and what makes religious beliefs distinctively religious. Finally, even if we accept Plantinga's account of religious belief as properly basic, and as not requiring evidence, there are a number of puzzles that arise when we attempt to explain the relation of religious belief to truth.

Because of the gaps in Plantinga's account that have been signaled here (and in several other recent texts), we clearly have to go beyond his Calvinist 'alternative' to traditional philosophy of religion, and look for another model of the nature and role of religion, and of the connection between religion and empirical evidence. Perhaps some clues will be found if we look at the phenomenon of religious pluralism and the issue of truth in religious belief. But this is a matter for another time.