

The Third Way¹ of Alvin Plantinga

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Do we know God? Is it rational for us to believe that He exists? Arguably these are the two most difficult epistemological questions that a believer, or even a non-believer for that matter, can ever dare to ask. Generally speaking, believers take it for granted that God exists and it is rational to believe in His existence. But is this really the case? This article will attempt to make a review of the debate regarding the rationality of belief in God. However, I will give due importance to the comments of Alvin Plantinga and what he is offering as a possible solution to this problem.

A.1. The Evidentialist Challenge: Belief in God is not Rational without Evidence

In his essay *Why I am not a Christian*,² Bertrand Russell wrote that if one day God will ask him how come he did not believe in Him, he is ready to respond by saying: "There is not enough evidence Lord that you exist; not enough evidence."

This position of Russell is better known as the evidentialist objection to belief in God. The following are some authors who are identified with evidentialism: W.K. Clifford, Bran Blanshard,

¹ I owe this phrase from Prof. Dra. Maria Cerezo.

² B. RUSSELL, *Why I am not a Christian*, Simon & Schuster, New York 1957.

Anthony Flew, and Madelyn Murray O'Hare. For example, W.K. Clifford said, "it is wrong, always, everywhere, and for everyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."³ Also Anthony Flew averred that "if it is to be established that there is a God, then we have to have good grounds for believing that this is indeed so. Until or unless some such grounds are produced we have literally no reason at all for believing; and in that situation the only reasonable posture must be that of either the negative atheist or agnostic."⁴ In a more radical vein Michael Scriven explained: "[W]e need not to have a proof that God does not exist in order to justify atheism. (...) The proper alternative, where there is no evidence, is not mere suspension of belief, e.g. about Santa Claus; it is disbelief."⁵

Plantinga describes the evidentialist objection as "the objection that theistic belief is irrational or unreasonable or intellectually second or third-rate because there is insufficient evidence for it."⁶ Or in the words of Nicholas Wolterstorff, "no religion is acceptable unless rational, and no religion is rational unless supported by evidence."⁷ Patrick Lee identifies at least three different, yet, related expressions of the evidentialist norm, to wit: First, it is not right to believe anything upon insufficient evidence; Second, a person *S* ought to proportion his belief in a proposition to the quality and quantity of evidence that he has to support the proposition in

³ W.K. CLIFFORD, "The Ethics of Belief," in *Lectures and Essays*, Macmillan, London 1901, p. 183. (Quoted in A. PLANTINGA, *Warranted Christian Belief*, Oxford University Press, New York 2000, p. 89. (Hereafter cited as WCB.)

⁴ A. FLEW, *The Presumption of Atheism*, Pemberton, London 1976, p. 22 (Cited in A. PLANTINGA – N. WOLTERSTORFF (eds.), *Faith and Rationality. Reason and Belief in God*, University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana 1983, p. 26. Hereafter cited as RBG)

⁵ M. SCRIVEN, *Primary Philosophy*, McGraw-Hill, New York 1966, p. 103. (Cited in A. PLANTINGA, RBG, p. 27.)

⁶ A. PLANTINGA, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1967, p. ix. (Hereafter cited as GOM.)

⁷ N. WOLTERSTORFF, "Introduction" in A. PLANTINGA – N. WOLTERSTORFF (eds.) RBG, p. 6.

question; And third, a person *S* must not go beyond the evidence he has in holding a belief.⁸ Lee summarizes these evidentialist norms as the rule that beliefs should be held and withheld according to the rule of *sola evidentia*.

A.2. Belief in God and Natural Theology

One approach to show that it is rational to believe in God in the evidentialist sense is found in natural theology, for one of the traditional roles of natural theology is to offer arguments for God's existence. We will choose at least three traditional theistic arguments that are supposed to provide enough evidence for the existence of God: the cosmological, teleological, and the ontological arguments. Since it is not our purpose here to focus on natural theology as such, we will only explain three traditional proofs: the cosmological, teleological, and ontological arguments.⁹

a) *The Cosmological Argument*

St. Thomas Aquinas says that there are things in nature that are possible to be and not to be in the sense that they can be generated and corrupted.¹⁰ However it is not possible that these things always exist, for those which can not-be at some time is not. Thus if it is the case that everything can not-be, then at one time nothing existed. But if there would be nothing in existence, then, there would be nothing in existence even now which is absurd, for we all know that whatever is existing began to exist through the one that was already existing. This goes to show that there must be a being whose existence is necessary and who did not receive its being or existence from another being, but is the cause of the being and existence of others. We call this being God.

⁸ P. LEE, "Evidentialism, Plantinga, and Faith and Reason," in L. ZAGZEBSKI (ed.) *Rational Faith. Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1993, p. 152.

⁹ For more detailed discussions, see his book, *God and Other Minds*, pp. 3-111.

¹⁰ T. AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 3, a. 3.

Now, does the cosmological argument offer a solid rational backing to theistic belief? Unfortunately, St. Thomas Aquinas himself claimed that there are no philosophical arguments for the conclusion that the world may not have existed for an infinite stretch of time.¹¹ This makes it difficult to connect the proposition *whatever can fail to exist at some time does not exist with if all things are contingent, then at one time nothing existed*. The inference is not valid. Obviously, no contingent being can survive an infinite stretch of time. "But," Plantinga asks, "what justifies the supposition that if all beings were contingent and past time is infinite, then there would have been a time at which all beings *simultaneously* failed to exist?"¹² It is also logically possible that there has been or there is no tendency for everything to go out of existence *simultaneously*.

b) The Ontological Argument

The following is Plantinga's formulation of the argument proposed by St. Anselm of Canterbury:¹³

- (1) God exists in the understanding but not in reality – assumption for *reductio*.
- (2) Existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding alone – premise.
- (3) A being having all of God's properties plus existence in reality can be conceived – premise.
- (4) A being having all of God's properties plus existence in reality is greater than God – from (1) and (2).
- (5) A being greater than God can be conceived – (3), (4).
- (6) It is false that a being greater than God can be conceived – by definition of 'God'.
- (7) Hence it is false that God exists in the understanding but not in reality – (1) – (6), *reductio ad absurdum*.

¹¹ Cf. T. AQUINAS, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II, Chapters 31-38.

¹² A. PLANTINGA, *GOM*, p. 24. (Plantinga's emphasis.)

¹³ See *Proslogion* and A. PLANTINGA, *GOM*, p. 29.

So if God exists in the understanding, then he also exists in reality. God exists in the understanding. Therefore he also exists in reality.

To simplify this discussion, Plantinga says that the argument of Anselm is similar to the story about the fictional greatest man in the State of Washington. If existent and non-existent beings may be compared with respect to greatness we would be obliged to claim that, say, the merely fictional greatest man in Washington is really greater than Jim Whittaker, one of America's leading mountain climbers. But obviously such a claim is absurd, if not false. The same thing must be said to the greatest possible being: if it does not exist (or if it only exists in the mind and not in reality) then if we can compare existents with nonexistents with respect to greatness at all, there may be many things greater to it.¹⁴ Plantinga concludes that the ontological argument is not valid.¹⁵

c) *The Teleological Argument*

Plantinga formulates the argument in the following manner:¹⁶

- (1) The 'productions of human contrivance' are the products of intelligent design.
- (2) The universe resembles the productions of human contrivance.

¹⁴ Cf. A. PLANTINGA, *GOM*, p. 81.

¹⁵ For some comments on Plantinga's criticism of Anselm's ontological argument, see the following: J.E. TOMBERLIN, "Plantinga and the Ontological Argument," in J.E. TOMBERLIN – P.V. INWAGEN (eds.) *Alvin Plantinga*, Reidel, Dordrecht 1985, pp. 258-270; P.E. OPPENHEIMER – E.N. ZALTA, "The Logic of the Ontological Argument," in J.E. TOMBERLIN (ed.) *Philosophical Perspectives*, 5, *Philosophy of Religion*, Ridgeview, Atascadero 1991, pp. 509-529. Plantinga himself has formulated his own modal ontological argument. For some interesting discussions on Plantinga's ontological argument see E. MOROS, *El argumento ontológico modal de Alvin Plantinga*, Eunsa, Pamplona 1997. Also, another version of the ontological argument that Plantinga considers ineffective is that of Charles Hartshorne and Norman Malcolm. Cf. A. PLANTINGA, *The Nature of Necessity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1974, pp. 212-213.

¹⁶ Cf. A. PLANTINGA, *GOM*, p. 7.

- (3) Therefore probably the universe is a product of intelligent design.
- (4) Therefore probably the author of the universe is an intelligent being.

Will the teleological argument fare better as a rational support to belief in God's existence? Plantinga, following the objection of David Hume,¹⁷ demurs. Hume says there is logical inconsistency between God's existence and the existence of evil. At the least, the existence of evil in the world does not support the conclusion that there is God or that the universe is designed by an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good God. At best, our universe looks like a badly crafted creation designed by an infant or ineffective deity, and not by an omnipotent and all-knowing God. Plantinga explains: "the existence of a powerful designer who is morally indifferent is as probable as the existence of God; but then on that evidence it is not more probable that God exists than that he does not."¹⁸

After this cursory survey of the strength of the cosmological, ontological and teleological arguments, Plantinga's conclusions were in the negative. He wrote: "And so it is hard to avoid the conclusion that natural theology does not provide a satisfactory answer to the question with which we began: Is it rational to believe in God?"¹⁹

B. THE FIDEIST SOLUTION: BELIEF IN GOD DOES NOT NEED EVIDENCE TO BE RATIONAL

If evidentialism demands evidence, fideism defends that no evidence whatsoever is necessary to make believe in God's exist-

¹⁷ Cf. Hume's book *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, H. D. AIKEN (ed.) Hafner Press, New York 1977.

¹⁸ A. PLANTINGA, *GOM*, p. 109.

¹⁹ A. PLANTINGA, *GOM*, p. 111. Plantinga acknowledges that the cosmological, ontological, and teleological arguments are not the only arguments for the existence of God. Surprisingly, however, he says that the other sorts of arguments "are not initially very plausible and do not become more so under close scrutiny." A. PLANTINGA, *GOM*, p. 111.

ence rational. Taken broadly, fideism argues that the existence of God and religious beliefs are beyond rational assessment. What is important is one's faith in God. Faith has priority over reason. There are many forms of fideism, but I will only include three, namely, the Traditional Fideism, Wittgensteinian Fideism, and Reformed Epistemology.

B.1. Traditional Fideism: Tertullian, Pascal, Kierkegaard

Tertullian once said that Jerusalem has nothing to do with Athens, reason with faith, religion with philosophy. Also, Blaise Pascal, in his *Pensées*, doubted the possibility of demonstrating the existence of God. He sustained that human reason is weak to grasp the existence of God. The only access we have to knowledge of God is through Jesus Christ. Søren Kierkegaard, on the other hand, opposed faith with reason. For him, faith does not need any form of rationality and reasonability, thus his insistence that Christianity can only be accepted through "leap of faith" for it is a religion based on revelation. Since it is impossible to rationally demonstrate revelation, religion is beyond the reach of reason.

B.2. Wittgensteinian Fideism

Wittgenstein wrote: "Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation."²⁰ The task of philosophy is therefore, according to Wittgenstein, only to describe how language is used. This is also true with regard to religious utterances. Religious utterances must be judged not according to how true or false or how rationally well founded they are, but on how far they can make a difference in the life of the believer. Proponents of Wittgensteinian fideism claim that religious discourse has its own internal logic that only those who practice religion can understand. Therefore religious beliefs, like the existence of God, must not be judged according to the criteria of other disciplines. In the words of Wittgenstein: "Practice gives the words their sense." In other words,

²⁰ L. WITTGENSTEIN, no. 124. *Philosophical Investigations*, Blackwell, Oxford 1953.

the meaning, sense, and relevance of religious concepts come from their use.

Further, God, for Wittgenstein, is the inexpressible.²¹ God belongs to the sphere of the mystical. He cannot appear in the world nor can He be expressed in language. The following are the more famous Wittgensteinian fideists: Norman Malcolm, Peter Winch, and D.Z. Phillips.

B.3. Reformed Epistemology

The so-called Reformed Epistemology got their inspiration from Reformed thinkers such as Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, Karl Barth, and John Calvin himself. Plantinga describes the stance of these theologians with respect to natural theology as the attitude that ranges from "indifference, through suspicion and hostility, to outright accusations of blasphemy."²² Calvin, for example, said that natural theology is not necessary for "knowledge of faith consists in assurance rather than comprehension."²³ In the same vein, Herman Bavinck averred that a "distinct natural theology, obtained apart from any revelation, merely through observation and study of the universe in which man lives, does not exist ... Scripture does not reason in abstract. It does not make God the conclusion of a syllogism, leaving it to us whether we think the argument hold or not. But it speaks with authority. Both theologically and religiously it proceeds from God as the starting point."²⁴ Thus for Bavinck, like for Calvin, belief in God does not need evidence, proof, or argument.

During the academic year 1979-1980, the Center for Christian Studies of Calvin College embarked a yearlong project on the

²¹ Cf. L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, no. 6.522.

²² A. PLANTINGA, "Self-Profile," p. 60.

²³ J. CALVIN, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III, ii, 14.9. (Cited in T. SULLIVAN, "Belief and Objectivity," in L. ZAGZEBSKI (ed.) *Rational Faith. Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology*, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame 1993, p. 136.

²⁴ H. BAVINCK, *The Doctrine of God*, W. HENDRICKSEN (trans.) Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1951, pp. 78-79. (Cited in A. PLANTINGA, *RBG*, p. 64.)

topic "Toward a Reformed View of Faith and Reason."²⁵ It was from this project that the so-called 'Reformed Epistemology' was conceived. Plantinga explains that the term 'Reformed' epistemologist, theologian, or philosopher, refers to someone "whose intellectual sympathies lie within the Protestant tradition going back to John Calvin."²⁶ Plantinga adopted the title 'Reformed Epistemology' to signify that this type of epistemology is similar to the one proposed by John Calvin, Herman Bavinck, and other Reformed theologians. Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, William Alston,²⁷ and George Mavrodes are the more important proponents of Reformed Epistemology.

The defenders of reformed epistemology do not have the same approach to the epistemological problem of theistic belief. They all sustain, however, that evidence, proofs, or arguments are not necessary for the epistemic validity and rationality of belief in God. George Mavrodes, for example, says that like Calvin, "the Reformed Epistemologists do not intend to provide theists with reasons to continue in their faith."²⁸ But perhaps no one expresses more forcefully the main claim of Reformed Epistemology than Plantinga himself. He writes: "[T]he believer is entirely within his intellectual rights in believing as he does even if he doesn't know of any theistic arguments (deductive or non-deductive), even if he doesn't believe that there is such argument, and even if in fact no such argument exists ... It is perfectly rational to accept belief in God without accepting it on the basis of any other beliefs or propositions at all."²⁹

²⁵ Cf. N. WOLTERSTORFF, "Introduction," in A. PLANTINGA – N. WOLTERSTORFF (eds.) *RBG*, p. 9.

²⁶ A. PLANTINGA, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" *Nous*, 15 (1981) p. 51, n. 2.

²⁷ William P. Alston, an Episcopalian, suggests that he prefers to be known as an 'Episcopalian epistemologist' than a 'reformed epistemologist'. Cf. R. TRIGG, *Rationality and Religion. Does Faith Need Reason?* Blackwell, Oxford 1998, p. 117.

²⁸ G. MAVRODES, "Jerusalem and Athens Revisited," in A. PLANTINGA – N. WOLTERSTORFF (eds.) *RBG*, p. 195.

²⁹ A. PLANTINGA, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" p. 42.

C.1. Plantinga's Criticism of the Evidentialist Solution

Plantinga sees two presumptions of the evidentialist position: one is epistemic, the other, ethical. First, he notes that what the evidentialist is claiming is that the theist needs to show that theistic belief is evidentially supported by arguments if he wants to be rational in holding it. Second, the theist has an ethical obligation not to accept belief in God if by chance he finds out that he has no sufficient evidence for it. Plantinga explains: "[B]y the time I wrote 'Reason and Belief in God,' ... in 1979-80 it was becoming clear that the evidentialist objector should be construed as holding that the theist who believes without evidence thereby violates an intellectual *obligation*, flouts some epistemic *duty* and is unjustified in the core sense of having done something one has no right to do."³⁰ Consequently the theist who holds belief in God even if he does not have sufficient evidence for it is not only irrational, but also intellectually inferior or even immoral. He violates Clifford's rule that 'it is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence'.

Now, Plantinga argues that evidentialism is actually rooted on classical foundationalism,³¹ a popular epistemological view whose proponents can be traced as far back as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and Locke. He says that these philosophers demanded that there be evidence for believing. Plato called this evidence 'account'. Aristotle took it as the conclusion of a syllogistic reasoning. And Descartes and Locke identified this element as certain clear and distinct proposition. Plantinga divides classical foundationalism in two groups: First, Ancient and Medieval Classical

³⁰ A. PLANTINGA, "A Christian Life Partly Lived," p. 75. (Plantinga's emphases.)

³¹ Plantinga explains: "The evidentialist objection to belief in God ... is obviously rooted in (the classical foundationalist) way of looking at things." A. PLANTINGA, *RBG*, p. 48; See also, A. PLANTINGA, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" *Nous*, 15 (1981) p. 44. There are authors, however, who disagree with Plantinga. Norman Kretzmann, for example, says that Plantinga's claim that evidentialism is rooted in foundationalism is unfounded. See N. KRETZMANN, "Evidence Against Anti-Evidentialism," in J.K. CLARK (ed) *Our Knowledge of God. Essays on Natural and Philosophical Theology*, Kluwer, Dordrecht 1992, pp. 17-38.

Foundationalism represented most especially by Plato and Aristotle; second, Modern Classical Foundationalism exemplified by the philosophies of Descartes and Locke. On one hand, Plantinga describes ancient and medieval foundationalists as those who hold that "a proposition is properly basic for a person if and only if it is either self-evident to *S* or evident to the senses."³² On the other hand, modern foundationalists are those who include self-evident propositions (but not those that are evident to the senses) plus clear and distinct perceptions or what Plantinga calls 'incorrigible' beliefs or propositions, as the only candidates for foundational beliefs or propositions. Plantinga means by 'incorrigible' beliefs those experiential beliefs we find to be obviously true, like the claims about our own mental life. For example, I may be wrong in thinking that I see a car, but I could not be wrong in holding the belief that I *seem* to see a car. It is an incorrigible belief for me.

Moreover, Plantinga says that foundationalism "is a picture or total way of looking at faith, knowledge, justified belief, rationality, and allied topics."³³ It is a view about noetic structures. Plantinga defines noetic structure as the set of propositions or beliefs a person holds, together with certain epistemic relations that hold between him and these propositions.³⁴ But the main thesis of foundationalism according to Plantinga is that a rational noetic structure is that which is structured properly. The imagery that illustrates best the foundationalist view is that of a pyramid. Like any building, there are parts of the edifice that have the role of supporting the entire structure. We usually call them as the structural foundations of the edifice. In like manner, beliefs can be classified in two groups: nonbasic and basic beliefs. Basic beliefs are those beliefs that support the nonbasic ones. Thus, a rational noetic structure is that which has two clearly delineated levels: the foundational level where foundational or basic – in other words, self-evident, evident to the senses, and incorrigible – beliefs are laid, and the upper level where nonbasic beliefs receive support from the basic beliefs. The instrument that connects the basic and the nonbasic levels is inferential reasoning.

³² A. PLANTINGA, "Self-Profile," p. 59.

³³ A. PLANTINGA, *RBG*, p. 48.

³⁴ A. PLANTINGA, *RBG*, p. 48.

So nonbasic beliefs are those derived from self-evident, evident to the senses, and incorrigible beliefs. For example, my belief that the English word 'badminton' is spelled b-a-d-m-i-n-t-o-n. This belief that I hold is based on another belief that I have: the belief that that is how the English dictionary says it is spelled. On the other hand, an example of a basic belief is my belief that that it is impossible for a thing to exist and not to exist in the same sense at the same time. I do not base it on other belief or beliefs. So beliefs at the foundational level are the ones that can stand by themselves. And they can be held rationally even if they are not supported by other beliefs. The same thing does not happen with respect to nonbasic beliefs. They need to be supported by foundational beliefs if they are to be held rationally.

Further still, basic beliefs can be proper or improper. For Plantinga, a properly basic belief is a belief that is basic *and* justified; whereas a nonproperly basic belief is that which is basic but not justified or rational. That means that it does not follow that all basic beliefs are rational or justified by the mere fact of being basic. There are cases of basic beliefs but are not rational for me to hold. For example, while reading a novel in my windowless room I hold the belief that a black car is passing by. My belief is basic, but not justified. The circumstance that I am in – the windowless room – does not make my belief justified. Plantinga thus avers that a properly basic belief is a belief that belongs to a rational noetic structure, and consequently, a nonproperly basic belief is that which pertains to an irrational noetic structure.³⁵

Now, Plantinga says that foundationalism is a view about noetic structures. A rational noetic structure is that which a person has who holds only those beliefs that are self-evident, evident to the senses, and incorrigible, or if they are nonbasic, these must be supported by the foundational beliefs. But if this is indeed the case, then it seems that belief in God cannot be in the foundational level of a rational noetic structure. The reason is obvious enough: theistic belief is not self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses. Therefore it needs the evidential support of arguments if it has to be rationally held. But that exactly is the problem.

³⁵ Cf. A. PLANTINGA, *RBG*, p. 55.

Plantinga has shown that so far there is no effective propositional evidence for the existence of God. Does this finally mean that belief in God is irrational? No. Or so Plantinga insists. He argues that what is actually wrong here is the foundationalist criterion itself.

According to Plantinga, the thesis behind classical foundationalism is that a belief is properly basic only if it is self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses. All other beliefs are rationally acceptable only in so far as they are supported or are probable with respect to properly basic beliefs. Plantinga develops two arguments against classical foundationalism. First, he says that if foundationalism were true, then many of our beliefs would be irrational. These would include beliefs about the past, the external world, and the existence of other minds: "there are enduring physical objects, or that there are other persons distinct from myself, or that the world has existed for more than five minutes: none of these ... is more probable than not with respect to what is self-evident or incorrigible for (us); at any rate no one has given good reason to think that any of them is."³⁶ But if indeed classical foundationalism were true, those beliefs would in theory be irrational.

Plantinga's second argument goes this way. He says that what the classical foundationalist sustains is that³⁷ (1) *A* is properly basic for me only if *A* is self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses for me. So presumably, (CF) classical foundationalist believes (1) on the basis of propositions that are properly basic for him to support (1). Yet no CF has provided arguments to support (1) from propositions that are incorrigible, self-evident, or evident to the senses. It thus looks there is no support for (1) from properly basic propositions. But if this is the case, CF is falling into the epistemological trap he himself has made. He is holding (1) even without the support of properly basic propositions. He is therefore being irrational. The only escape he has

³⁶ A. PLANTINGA, *RBG*, pp. 59-60.

³⁷ Cf. A. PLANTINGA, *RBG*, pp. 59 ff.

is to take (1) as properly basic. But (1) clearly stipulates that a proposition is properly basic only if it is self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses. Obviously enough, (1) is not similar to any of the three candidates. Therefore Plantinga concludes, and rightly so, that the CF who accepts (1) as rational to hold despite the fact that (1) does not meet the conditions for proper basicity commits self-referential inconsistency. Consequently Plantinga rejects classical foundationalism, and with it, the evidentialist challenge as well.³⁸

C.2. Plantinga's Criticism of the Fideist Solution

Given that evidentialism is unacceptable, is fideism a better option? Is it the case that belief in the existence of God does not need any evidence at all? Plantinga says that the problem of the fideist posture is that it presumes that belief in God is a deliverance of faith. It is not. Or so he claims. Thanks to *sensus divinitatis*, a cognitive faculty which he says is part of our cognitive mechanism, we can truly affirm that theistic belief is a deliverance of reason. He explains: "One who follows Calvin here will also hold that a capacity to apprehend God's existence is as much part of our natural noetic or intellectual equipment as is the capacity to apprehend truths of logic, perceptual truths, truths about the past, and truths about other minds."³⁹ Thus belief in God is not formed in us by means of faith or revelation. It is a product of a rational, though not '*reasoning*' or '*ratiocination*', process. It is not a result of irrational, purely sentimental processes which some fideists are claiming.

³⁸ Plantinga does not reject classical foundationalism for being a *foundationalist* epistemological theory. Rather he rejects it for being too narrow to accommodate other beliefs among the list of basic beliefs, as we shall see later. Therefore Anthony M. Matteo is mistaken when he says that Plantinga rejects 'all forms of foundationalism as such.' A.M. MATTEO, "Can Belief in God be Basic?" *Horizons*, 15 (1988) p. 272. (Cited in T.W. TILLEY, "Reformed Epistemology and Religious Fundamentalism: How Basic are our Basic Beliefs?" *Modern Theology*, 6 (1990) p. 254, n. 5.)

³⁹ A. PLANTINGA, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy*, 1 (1984) p. 262.

D. THE THIRD WAY OF ALVIN PLANTINGA

While it is true that Alvin Plantinga himself is a Reformed Epistemologist, he has been developing lately an epistemological model that can no longer be strictly considered "Reformed." He calls it the "Aquinas/Calvin" model⁴⁰ for it is a combination of the stances of St. Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin. In other words, it is a position that somehow allows arguments to defend the rationality of belief in God.

I have said earlier that Plantinga, as a reformed epistemologist, defends that belief in God does not need evidence for it is a properly basic belief. In other words, he has granted theistic belief that status denied it by the classical foundationalist and evidentialist.

Plantinga broached for the first time⁴¹ the subject that theistic belief could be and is often rational even though it does not have evidential support in the concluding paragraphs of his paper "The Probabilistic Argument from Evil."⁴² He explained in this article that the foundation of a person's noetic structure is the set of beliefs or propositions he starts with, and the person in question properly judges the validity of other beliefs or propositions by their relation to those in this set. Now Plantinga asked why can the theist not take belief in God itself as a member of this set, so that it is one of the beliefs or propositions with respect to which the acceptability or rationality of other beliefs is to be judged? What was Plantinga's question here would be the position he would be defending soon with his sharp and rigorous analytical style. Plantinga says that belief in God produced by the module *sensus divinitatis* is properly basic in the sense that the theist typically does not accept it on the evidential basis of other beliefs. He thus compares theistic belief with perceptual belief, memory belief, belief in other minds, and belief in the existence of the external world. This means that for Plantinga, the propositions

⁴⁰ Cf. A. PLANTINGA, WCB, p. 168.

⁴¹ Cf. J.F. SENNETT, *Modality, Probability, and Rationality*, p. 101.

⁴² A. PLANTINGA, "The Probabilistic Argument from Evil," *Philosophical Studies*, 35 (1979) pp. 1-53.

- (1) I see a dog in the field,
- (2) I had coffee and sandwich for breakfast,
- (3) Loreta, Ernesto, Nilo, Marilou and Marites are in pain,
- (4) God forgives me,

are all properly basic in that, for example, I am rational to hold every one of them even if I do not have any evidential support for them from other beliefs. Plantinga clarifies, however, that what is properly basic is not really the simple belief that *there is such a person as God* or that *God exists*.⁴³ What are properly basic are propositions or beliefs such as

- (5) God is talking to me,
- (6) God has created the universe,
- (7) God is not happy with what I have done.

But since such propositions self-evidently entail that God exists, he claims that we may loosely say that belief in God is properly basic. In fact this is also true even with respect to perceptual belief, memory belief and belief in other minds. For example, the propositions

- (8) There are external objects,
- (9) The world has existed for more than five hours,
- (10) There are other persons,

are not exactly properly basic. What are properly basic are propositions such as (1)-(3) given above. But since propositions (1)-(3) immediately and self-evidently entail propositions (8)-(10), it can also be said, broadly that is, that propositions (8)-(10) are properly basic.

That belief in God is properly basic means that the theist does not typically hold it on account of other beliefs he holds. As a matter of fact, the theist in question will not even be paying attention to his religious experience or his beliefs. Instead he will be concentrating on God. Perhaps an example of perceptual belief can help clarify what Plantinga is saying here. For instance, upon having an experience of a certain sort, Jen Jen believes that there

⁴³ Cf. A. PLANTINGA, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" p. 46.

is a tree before her. She does not hold this belief on the basis of other beliefs. She does not reason like, "whenever I have this kind of experience, it always happens that there is a tree before me; I am having this kind of experience again; therefore, there must be a tree before me right now." Plantinga argues that with regard to perceptual belief, we normally do not make any reasoning at all in the sense that we base a belief with still another belief. Jen Jen's belief that there is a tree before her is not the conclusion of inferential reasoning, but is formed in her on the occasion of having that characteristic experience of perceiving a tree.

Plantinga says that the same thing happens to theistic belief. The belief of the theist that, say, *God forgives him*, is not a conclusion of inferential reasoning. Rather, it is occasioned by that sort of characteristic religious experience that he is "being forgiven by God". In other words, on the occasion of this characteristic sort of religious experience the theist immediately and noninferentially acquires the belief that God forgives him. And since the belief that God forgives him self-evidently entails that God exists, the theist holds immediately and non-inferentially by extension the belief that there is God. Consequently, belief in God is properly basic for the theist.

What Plantinga wants to underscore here is that people do acquire belief in God *on the occasion* of certain experiences in the same way that people acquire memory, *a priori*, or perceptual beliefs upon having certain experiences. And since we are typically rational in holding memory, perceptual, extrinsic, and *a priori* beliefs – some authors call these beliefs 'paradigm cases of proper basicity' – even without arguments, the same thing must be said with respect to belief in God. In the final analysis Plantinga is arguing that given that the cognitive faculty responsible to produce theistic belief in us belongs to the same cognitive mechanism we all have, it would be absurd if we trust our cognitive faculties only when they form the paradigm cases of proper basicity, but not when they, or the faculty specifically designed to do it, produce theistic belief in us. Given that we do not have a reason or two to doubt, it is either we typically trust all the deliverances of our cognitive faculties or not any one of them, but not take some as rational and reject others.

E. IS PLANTINGA A FIDEIST?

E.1. Plantinga is a Fideist

That there are authors who accuse Plantinga of fideism is not a surprise to many philosophers of religion. Terrence Penelhum, for example, explicitly identifies Plantinga as an evangelical fideist. He says that Plantinga's claim that belief in God is a common sense belief shows that he is a fideist, for what is characteristic of convictions from common sense is that they are devoid of rational justification.⁴⁴ William Abraham could only agree. Abraham also accuses Plantinga of fideism. He says that Plantinga's "central claim is that belief in God does not require reasons to be rational. That is surely what most fideists have fundamentally believed (...) On our account of the fideist tradition (Plantinga) is a moderate fideist, indeed a moderate of moderates, but he is a fideist nonetheless. Perhaps he is one of the best philosophical fideist to appear of late."⁴⁵

Another author who opines that Plantinga is a fideist is Gary Gutting. Gutting believes that Plantinga includes religious belief among the deliverances of reason only because he thinks the theist has the epistemic right to believe. But if Plantinga takes deliverances of reason to be what a person must believe if he is to be rational, then he does not consider religious belief as part of the deliverances of reason.⁴⁶

Further still, Roger Trigg explains that Plantinga wants supernaturalistic metaphysics to guarantee the rationality of theistic belief. The problem is Plantinga still fails to establish such

⁴⁴ Cf. T. PENELHUM, *God and Skepticism*, Reidel, Dordrecht 1983, p. 147. However, he also acknowledges that Plantinga's arguments for the rationality of belief in God seem to go against the evangelical fideist fundamental contention that it is nonintellectual factors that must be the basis of a person's belief in God.

⁴⁵ W. ABRAHAM, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, Englewoods Cliffs, Prentice-Hall 1985, p. 92-93. (Cited in K. J. CLARK, *Return to Reason. A Critique of Enlightenment Evidentialism and a Defense of Reason and Belief in God*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1990, p. 155-156).

⁴⁶ Cf. G. GUTTING, "The Catholic and the Calvinist: A Dialogue on Faith and Reason," *Faith and Philosophy*, 2 (1985) pp. 254-255.

metaphysics. Trigg says that in the last analysis it appears that reformed epistemology succumbs to the temptation of retreating to a faith that is groundless in that it has no other option than to appeal to faith or 'trust' in some way or another.⁴⁷

E.2. Plantinga is not a Fideist

William Alston says, however, that Plantinga is not a fideist, at least not in the sense that Wittgenstein, Norman Malcolm, Peter Winch and D.Z. Phillips are fideists.⁴⁸ Unlike Wittgensteinian fideists, who put more emphasis on the role that affirmations of belief in God play in the religious practices rather than on the epistemic content of such affirmations, Plantinga acknowledges the importance of the cognitive content of the faith. Alston explains that Plantinga "insists that it is a matter of objective fact whether there is an omnipotent, perfectly good creator of the universe, that belief in God is either true or false in a perfectly straightforward sense of these terms, the same sense in which it is either true or false that snow is white."⁴⁹ Plantinga holds that the cognitive content of religious belief is not only objective but also is the one that determines the religious practice of an epistemic community, and not vice versa.

Enrique Romerales also says that albeit there is a bit of similarity between Wittgensteinian fideism and the reformed epistemologists in general and Plantinga in particular, there are more issues in which they differ.⁵⁰ The former sustains that natural

⁴⁷ Cf. R. TRIGG, *Rationality and Religion. Does Faith Need Reason?* Blackwell, Oxford 1998, p. 131.

⁴⁸ See P. WINCH, *The Idea of a Social Science*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1958; D.Z. PHILLIPS, *The Concept of Prayer*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1970; N. MALCOLM, "The Groundlessness of Belief," in S. BROWN (ed.) *Reason and Religion*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1977, pp. 143-157.

⁴⁹ W. ALSTON, "Plantinga's Epistemology of Religious Belief," in J. TOMBERLIN – P. INWAGEN (eds), *Alvin Plantinga*, Reidel, Dordrecht 1985, p. 293.

⁵⁰ Cf. E. ROMERALES, "Introducción," in E. ROMERALES (ed.) *Creencia y racionalidad. Lecturas de filosofía de la religión*, Anthropos, Barcelona 1992, pp. 36-39.

theology misinterprets the nature of religion, faith, and belief. According to Wittgensteinian fideism, religion has no foundation. It is a form of life, and not a system of beliefs. Therefore reason, argument, and evidence are irrelevant to faith. On the other hand, Plantinga does sustain that although natural theology is not necessary for the rationality of theistic belief, it is not useless. He himself practices natural theology occasionally. Moreover, albeit Plantinga agrees with the Wittgensteinian fideist that religion is a way of living one's life, he likewise sustains that religion is about beliefs that are true or false. In other words, unlike the Wittgensteinian fideist, Plantinga affirms that although it is right to hold theistic belief without reason to be rational, it is not right to do so against reason or evidence. It matters to the theist that there are no effective objections to belief in God.

Another defender of Plantinga is Richard Askew. Askew disagrees with Penelhum's claim that Plantinga is an evangelical fideist. He says that one reason why Plantinga cannot be a fideist is that belief in God for Plantinga is not a deliverance of faith but of natural reason. Plantinga explicates there are certain conditions like guilt, fear, and gratitude that confer the rational justification of theistic belief. Hence the ground of theistic belief is not something fortuitous. For Plantinga, the cognitive process that triggers it is as epistemically legitimate as the processes that activate perceptual and memory beliefs. Askew says, "it is fair to say that while Plantinga makes use of an apologetic strategy that may resemble, in some ways, the fideist tradition in apologetics, he is not a fideist."⁵¹ The positions of Conesa⁵² and Cooke⁵³ bear a good bit of similarity to that of Askew.

⁵¹ Cf. R. ASKEW, "On Fideism and Alvin Plantinga," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 23 (1988) p. 14.

⁵² See F. CONESA, "La epistemología reformada," *Revista de Filosofía*, 11 (1998) p. 58.

⁵³ V.M. COOKE says that Plantinga is not a fideist for Plantinga even sustains that belief in God can be accepted and known by natural reason. Cf. V.M. COOKE, SJ "Current Theology. The New Calvinist Epistemology," *Theological Studies*, 47 (1986) p. 281.

Furthermore, Charles Taliaferro likewise opines that Plantinga need not be considered a fideist. Plantinga argues there are grounds for theistic belief and this means he does not take it to be fortuitous, self-vindicating or person-relative. Besides, he claims that experience and reflection play crucial roles in the formation and in maintaining religious belief. Taliaferro considers the accusation that Plantinga advocates a fideistic philosophy as not fair.⁵⁴

Moreover, William Craig also says it is wrong to characterize Plantinga's view as fideistic. His position is that Plantinga's religious epistemology is in fact a sort of disguised evidentialism.

"(I)n considering whether a person who holds to belief in God as properly basic may be open to argument, Plantinga appears to allow that belief in God so held may be overcome by argument, so that the theist in order to be rational may have to abandon his belief in God (...) Plantinga (thus) clearly denies that a person who takes belief in God as basic remains rationally warranted in that belief no matter what counter argument or counter evidence arises. The circumstances which ground his belief confer only a *prima facie* justification, not an *ultima facie* justification, to that belief."⁵⁵

Craig says that the importance Plantinga gives to evidence or argument in maintaining belief indicates that he is no fideist. For what is characteristic of a fideist is to hold on to what he believes in spite of contrary evidence. Plantinga, on the contrary, recognizes that evidence matters for the *ultima facie* justification of theistic belief.

⁵⁴ Cf. C. TALIAFERRO, "Philosophy of Religion," in N. BUNNIN – E.P. TSUI-JAMES (eds.) *The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford 1996, p. 464.

⁵⁵ Cf. W.L. Craig, *Introduction: The Resurrection of Theism*, World Wide Web Page. (URL: <http://campus.leaderu.com/truth/3truth01.html>) (Visited: 18/12/1999).

E.3. Plantinga's Defense

In his defense from Ralph McInerny's accusation that Reformed epistemology is a form of fideism, Plantinga says that we can distinguish two kinds of fideism: extreme fideism and moderate fideism.⁵⁶ On one hand, moderate fideism is reliance upon faith rather than reason in religious matters. On the other hand, extreme fideism, is also reliance upon faith rather than reason but accompanied by a disparagement and denigration of reason. In what sense then is Plantinga a fideist? Apropos of extreme fideism, Plantinga remarks that one way a person could be an extreme fideist is to claim that to take a proposition on faith is superior than to hold it on the basis of reason. Another way is to hold, like Kant, that reason without the aid of faith falls into paradox and antinomy on important issues. Still another is to proclaim, like Kierkegaard, that when faith and reason conflict on issues related to religious doctrines, one should follow the dictates of faith rather than reason. Is Plantinga then an extreme fideist? In his response, Plantinga denies that he is an extreme fideist. And proof of it is that there is nothing in his views on the proper basicity of belief in God that commits him to proposing that faith and reason conflict, or that one has to abandon reason and solely rely on faith when dealing with issues on theistic belief.

But if Plantinga is not an extreme fideist, then is he a moderate fideist? Plantinga explicates that the answer to that question depends upon how we use the terms 'reason' and 'faith'. If on the one hand we use the term 'faith' to mean to accept a proposition but to accept it *not* on the basis of argument, inference or reasoning, anything that we take as basic is taken on faith. For example, since we take $1 + 1 = 2$ and $1 + 2 = 3$ as basic, then we take them on faith. Therefore we are fideists with regard to these mathematical propositions. The same thing can be said to the other paradigm cases of properly basic beliefs. On the other hand, if we mean to accept a proposition on the basis of reason as to

⁵⁶ Cf. A. Plantinga, *RBG*, pp. 87-88.

hold the proposition in question on the basis of argument or evidence, then we take $16 \times 24 = 384$ by reason, for we accept it on the basis of calculation, which is a form of rational demonstration.

However Plantinga says that the way reason and faith are distinguished here is ambiguous. For it is not really clear that we accept basic propositions *not* on the evidential basis of any argument, inference or reasoning whatsoever. Suppose Leonor accepts that $1 + 1 = 3$ and does so because she believes God proposes it and she knows that God proposes only truths and not falsities. On this construal, she holds $1 + 1 = 3$ not on faith but by reason. Consequently she is not a fideist in that sense for she holds it on the basis of evidence that whatever God proposes is true and since God proposes that $1 + 1 = 3$ then it must be true. Plantinga thus remarks that all these only go to show that what “we take on faith is not simply what we take as basic, and what we accept by reason is not simply what we take on the basis of other propositions. The deliverances of reason include propositions taken as basic, and the deliverances of faith include propositions accepted on the basis of others.”⁵⁷

But if Plantinga is not even a moderate fideist in the above sense, in what sense is he such then? Plantinga explains that he is fideist only if he holds that belief in God is not among the deliverances of reason, and therefore must be accepted on faith and on *faith alone*. But this is precisely what he does not agree. He maintains that the deliverances of reason include not just inferred propositions, but also basic and properly basic propositions. Plantinga says that we human beings are so constructed that under certain relevant circumstances, we naturally and immediately form belief in God as well as belief in other minds, perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs and other basic beliefs. He does not only hold that there is no conflict between faith and reason with regard to theistic belief, but also argues that belief in God is a deliverance of reason and not of faith.

⁵⁷ A. PLANTINGA, *RBG*, p. 89.

Indeed, I have two reasons for the conclusion that it is not correct to classify Plantinga as fideist. First, as was pointed out by W. Craig⁵⁸, Plantinga does not only maintain that belief in God is a deliverance of reason, but also holds that arguments have a role to play in maintaining or even rejecting belief in God. Plantinga acknowledges that the circumstances that ground theistic belief provide it only a *prima facie* justification, not an *ultima facie* justification. Therefore some form of evidence may ultimately be needed to confer it an *ultima facie* justification. Second, Plantinga himself has developed his own version of the ontological argument, which is one of the traditional arguments of natural theology.

I also agree with W. Craig and L. Zagzebski⁵⁹ that Plantinga admits a gap between rationality and truth. According to Craig, "Plantinga agrees that rationality has no necessary connection with truth. In certain circumstances, it may be rational to accept a belief that is, in fact, false, or to reject a belief that is, after all, true. Perhaps the available evidence is preponderant for some belief that is, unbeknownst to us, false, while the evidence for the true belief may be slim or self-contradictory."⁶⁰ But Craig asks: how does the theist know that his belief that God exists, while properly basic and rational, is not, nonetheless, false? True enough, Plantinga insists time and again that negative apologetics is enough. And so far he has been successful in showing that the proposition *God exists* is neither false nor improbable, but not that it is true. Notwithstanding, we find those theistic arguments he is proposing as actually pointing to that direction.⁶¹

⁵⁸ W.L. CRAIG, Introduction: The Resurrection of Theism, (URL: <http://campus.leaderu.com/truth/3truth01.html>) (Visited: 18/17/1999)

⁵⁹ Linda Zagzebski mentioned to me in conversation during the *II Simposio Internacional Fe Cristiana y Cultura Contemporanea* that Plantinga sees a gap between rationality of belief in God and the truth of theism. The symposium took place at the University of Navarre, Pamplona, Spain on May 15-16 2000. Zagzebski herself delivered a lecture during the symposium. The title of her piece was, 'Religious Diversity and Social Responsibility'.

⁶⁰ W. L. CRAIG, *Introduction: The Resurrection of Theism*, World Wide Web Page. (URL: <http://campus.leaderu.com/truth/3truth01.html>) (Visited: 18/12/1999)

⁶¹ For more discussions on this topic, see E. MOROS, *El argumento ontológico modal de Alvin Plantinga*, Eunsa, Pamplona 1997.

Conclusion

So neither the evidentialist nor the fideist offers sufficient solution to the problem of the rationality of belief in God. What Plantinga has accomplished is he was able to strike a balance between those two positions by proposing a third way of looking at the rationality issue of theistic belief. His stance is a sort of an alternative to evidentialism and fideism. For while he sustains that belief in God is rational even if there is no evidence for it, he does not say that it is rational even if there is evidence against it. Proof of it, he sees to it that arguments against God's existence are thoroughly refuted.⁶² That is why he is not a fideist. On the other hand, while he says there are arguments that support belief in God, he does not agree that those arguments have to be propositional or conclusive to be a source of warrant for theistic belief. That is why it is also a mistake to consider Plantinga as an evidentialist. What he claims is that belief in the existence of God is analogous to belief in the existence of other minds and external objects. These are beliefs we hold rationally even if we do not have conclusive evidence for them. But to say we do not have conclusive evidence for them is not to say *we do not have any* evidence for them, or that we hold them by faith. He says that our evidences for those kinds of beliefs are non-propositional and non-conclusive. But they are evidences nonetheless. □

⁶² The following authors agree that Plantinga's *free will defense* shows that the logical argument from evil is not acceptable: R.M. ADAMS, "Plantinga on the Problem of Evil," p. 226 in J.E. TOMBERLIN – P.V. INWAGEN (eds) *Alvin Plantinga*, Reidel, Dordrecht 1985, p. 226; D. WISDO, "The Fragility of Faith: Toward a Critique of Reformed Epistemology," *Religious Studies* 24 (1988) p. 373; J.F. SENNET, *Modality, Probability and Rationality. A Critical Examination of Alvin Plantinga's Philosophy*, Peter Lang, New York 1992, p. 69; T. TILLEY, "Reformed Epistemology and Religious Fundamentalism: How Basic are Our Basic Beliefs?" *Modern Theology*, 6 (1990) p. 237; W. HASKER, "The Foundations of Theism: Scoring the Quinn-Plantinga," *Faith and Philosophy*, 15 (1998) p. 62; S. DAWSON, "Proper Functionalism: A Better Alternative?" *Religious Studies*, 34 (1998) p. 134. For more information regarding Plantinga's free will defense please see his book *God, Freedom and Evil*, Eerdmans, Michigan 1977 and Chapter 6 of *God and Other Minds*, Cornell, New York 1990, pp. 131-155.