

Alvin Plantinga: The Rationality of Belief in God and Natural Theology

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The Calvinist philosopher Alvin Plantinga is probably the most important analytic theist of the 20th century. The relevance of the philosophy of Plantinga for contemporary analytic theism is not only due, however, to the great interest his defense of the rationality of the belief that God exists has caused, but also for the resurgence of theistic, more specifically Christian, philosophy that went along with it. Thanks to the influence of his works on theism, there is a notable renewal of Christian philosophy among Anglo-American philosophers. J.F. Sennett wrote that for a very long time, God or theism was not a usual topic among academic philosophers. But not anymore today.¹ Through the efforts of several Christian philosophers – with Alvin Plantinga playing a key role – there is an ever-increasing interest to include God in the philosophical discourse of many English-speaking philosophers. *Time* magazine fittingly calls Plantinga, “America’s leading orthodox Protestant philosopher of God.”²

What Plantinga really defends is not that it is rational in the sense of being ‘reasonable’ *to believe* that God exists. To say so would mean there are arguments, reasons, or evidence that purportedly show that the proposition *God exists* is true, and on that account, it is reasonable to accept that proposition. What Plantinga

¹ Cf. J.F. SENNETT, *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1998, p. xii.

² *Time*, “Modernizing the case of God,” 115 no. 14, (April 7, 1980) p. 36.

contends is that *theistic* belief typically formed in us is rational. In other words, Plantinga distinguishes the reasonability of believing in God from the rationality of belief in God, and what he argues as rational is not the *act* of believing in God, but belief in God *qua* belief, or as a belief that is formed in us on the occasion of certain experiences. Therefore Plantinga does not want to convince those who do not believe in theism that they can reasonably believe that God exists. What Plantinga attempts at is to explain why theistic belief that people hold is rational and not irrational.

This article will focus only on the accusation that it is not rational to believe that God exists on account of the alleged lack of evidence for it and the response that Plantinga made to defend theistic belief. But to get a good grasp of this debate, a brief explanation of the issues involved is in order.

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

Is it rational to believe that God exists even if you do not have proof that He does exist? While some people may readily affirm, others beg to disagree. In his essay *Why I am not a Christian*,³ Bertrand Russell, wrote that if one day God will ask him how come he did not believe in God, he is ready to respond by saying: "There is not enough evidence Lord that you exist; not enough evidence."

This stand of Russell relative to theistic belief is better known as the evidentialist objection to belief in God. Among those who defend the evidentialist position are W. K. Clifford, Bran Blanshard, Anthony Flew, and Madelyn Murray O'Hare. Anthony Flew avers 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

³ B. RUSSELL, *Why I am not a Christian*, Simon & Schuster, New York 1957.

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

radical vein Michael Scriven writes: "[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

The believers are therefore challenged to provide arguments the conclusions of which validly support the propositional belief that God exists. Failure to do so would mean to strike an irrational pose for it would mean holding a belief even in the absence of sufficient evidence. In this connection, 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 question; And third, a person *S* must not go beyond the evidence he has in holding a belief.⁸ With a fine sense of humor Lee summarizes those evidentialist norms as the rule that beliefs should be held and withheld according to the rule of *sola evidentia*.

B. Belief in God and Natural Theology

If there are no forceful arguments for theistic belief then to hold belief in God is irrational. But is it really the case that there is no sufficient evidence for the existence of God? One approach to show that it is rational to believe in God in the evidentialist sense

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.) *Faith and Rationality. Reason and Belief in God*, p. 6.

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.

is to be found in natural theology. Indeed, one of the traditional roles of natural theology is to offer arguments for the existence of God. Thus it seems that belief in God, particularly in the Judeo-Christian tradition, has sufficient evidence after all. 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 these arguments we will explain only the salient points related to the validity of these three arguments.⁹

a) *The Cosmological Argument*

The cosmological argument is also known as the Third Way of Thomas Aquinas.¹⁰ 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. 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.

Now it seems however that the cosmological argument is not effective. We recall here that even Thomas Aquinas himself claimed there are no philosophical arguments for the conclusion that the world may have not existed for an infinite stretch of time.¹¹ With this in mind it is difficult to bridge the gap between the propositions *whatever can fail to exist at some time does not exist* and *if all things are contingent, then at one time nothing existed*. The inference is not valid. True enough, no contingent being would survive an infinite stretch of time. "But," Plantinga asks, "what

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

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

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

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 The problem here is that it is also logically possible that there has been or there is no tendency for everything to go out of existence *simultaneously*. The only thing that the notion of 'contingency' suggests is that no such a being would survive an infinite stretch of time. Therefore it can also be argued that there have always been ordinary, contingent objects whereby some ceased to exist while others continue to do so. Plantinga concludes that the cosmological argument is ineffective.

b) The Ontological Argument

We will follow here Plantinga's formulation of the argument proposed by St. Anselm of Canterbury:¹³

God exists in the understanding but not in reality – assumption for *reductio*.

Existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding alone – premise.

A being having all of God's properties plus existence in reality can be conceived – premise.

A being having all of God's properties plus existence in reality is greater than God – from (1) and (2).

A being greater than God can be conceived – (3), (4).

It is false that a being greater than God can be conceived – by definition of 'God'.

Hence it is false that God exists in the understanding but not in reality – (1) – (6), *reductio ad absurdum*.

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

Plantinga does not totally reject the possibility that the ontological argument can succeed. What he only claims is that none of

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

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

the known ways of formulating it do in fact succeed.¹⁴ To simplify the 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.¹⁵ Plantinga concludes that the ontological argument is not valid.¹⁶

c) *The Teleological Argument*

The teleological argument is sometimes called as the argument from design. Plantinga formulates the argument in the following manner:¹⁷

The 'productions of human contrivance' are the products of intelligent design.

The universe resembles the productions of human contrivance.

Therefore probably the universe is a product of intelligent design.

¹⁴ Cf. A. PLANTINGA, *GOM*, p. 64.

¹⁵ Cf. A. PLANTINGA, *GOM*, p. 81.

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ Cf. A. PLANTINGA, *GOM*, p. 7.

Therefore probably the author of the universe is an intelligent being.

Plantinga follows the objection of Hume against the validity of the teleological argument.¹⁸ Hume argued that the existence of evil in the world is logically inconsistent with the existence of God, or at least does not support the conclusion that He exists or that the universe is designed by an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good God. Indeed, it seems that the existence of natural evils in the world shows that the universe must have been designed by an infant or ineffective deity, and not by an omnipotent and all-knowing God. Now Plantinga, in agreement with Hume, says, "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."¹⁹ Plantinga once again concludes that like the cosmological and the ontological arguments, the teleological argument is equally ineffective.

Therefore Plantinga's conclusions were not favorable to any of the three arguments. He did not find any of the argument conclusive enough to meet the evidentialist challenge. He thus concludes that the traditional arguments for the existence of God, and natural theology in general, are not successful. He writes: "And so it is hard to avoid the conclusion that natural theology does not provide a satisfactory answer to the question...: Is it rational to believe in God?"²⁰

C. Reformed Epistemology

While Plantinga did attempt at formulating proofs for the existence of God, it seems that he really never believed in the need for natural theology to defend the rationality of theistic belief. He

¹⁸ Cf. Hume's book *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, H.D. AIKEN (ed.) Hafner Press, New York, 1977.

¹⁹ A. PLANTINGA, *GOM*, p. 109.

²⁰ 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.

is therefore just like the rest of the Reformed thinkers, like Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, Karl Barth, and John Calvin himself, in their attitude towards natural theology. 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."²¹ Calvin, for example, says that natural theology is not necessary for "knowledge of faith consists in assurance rather than comprehension."²² In the same vein, Herman Bavinck says 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."²³ Thus for Bavinck, like for Calvin, belief in God does not need evidence, proof, or argument. It is a belief that a person acquires immediately and noninferentially. For example, just as I do not evidence to know that other minds exist, the same thing must be said with regard to belief in God.

Moreover, Plantinga says that what exactly these reformed and Calvinist theologians were opposing against natural theology was one of the main theses of classical foundationalism.²⁴ More specifically, these theologians were holding the following three theses: First, the theist who takes belief in God as basic does not violate an epistemic norm or intellectual obligation. Second, the theist who holds belief in God without evidence does not have a defective noetic structure. He is perfectly rational to hold and maintain such belief. And third, belief in God on the basis of evidence is not epistemically superior to basic belief in God.

²¹ A. PLANTINGA, "Self-Profile," in J.E. TOMBERLIN – P. INWAGEN (eds.) *Alvin Plantinga*, Reidel, Dordrecht 1985, p. 60.

²² 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.)

²³ H. BAVINCK, *The Doctrine of God*, W. HENDRICKSEN (trans.) Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1951, pp. 78-79. (Cited in A. PLANTINGA, *RBG*, p. 64.)

²⁴ Cf. A. PLANTINGA, "Self-Profile," p. 61.

In agreement with the reformed theologians, Plantinga distanced himself from Aquinas, who he believed defended that belief in God is not good, from an epistemic point of view, as it would be if it were supported by proofs or arguments.²⁵ Plantinga followed Bavinck instead and sustains that belief in God supported by arguments is not epistemically superior to basic belief in God. Better still, Plantinga even explicated that to demand proof for the existence of God is perverse, for it is like the person who believes in the existence of his wife on the basis of evidence afforded him by the analogical argument for the existence of other minds. Thus while Plantinga did and does not totally reject natural theology – he himself has practiced it –²⁶ he says that theistic belief does not need evidence from natural theology to be rational.

Now through the spiritual, intellectual, and theological influence of the protestant reformers, a new movement in epistemology was formed under the name “Reformed Epistemology.” Plantinga says that the term ‘Reformed’ epistemologist, theologian, or philosopher, refers to someone “whose intellectual sympathies lie within the Protestant tradition going back to John Calvin.”²⁷ Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, William Alston,²⁸ and George Mavrodes are the more important proponents of Reformed Epistemology.

Reformed epistemologists 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

²⁵ Cf. A. PLANTINGA, “Self-Profile,” pp. 61-62.

²⁶ As we have noted earlier, Plantinga himself has revived the ontological proof for the existence of God, which is one of the traditional arguments from natural theology. For a more detailed discussion on his modal version of the ontological argument see his books *Nature of Necessity*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1975, pp. 213-221 and *God, Freedom, and Evil*, Eerdmans, Michigan 1991 (edn.), pp. 108-112.

²⁷ A. PLANTINGA, “Is Belief in God Properly Basic?” *Nous*, 15 (1981) p. 51, n. 2.

²⁸ 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.

faith.”²⁹ 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.”³⁰ So Plantinga follows Calvin’s approach to the problem of the rationality of the belief that God exists by maintaining that the theist is entirely within his epistemic rights, entirely rational, in holding belief in God, even if he has no argument for it, and the reason for this is because belief in God is properly basic.³¹

D. Belief in God is Properly Basic

Plantinga says that belief in God produced by the module *sensus divinitatis*, an especial cognitive faculty created by God in us to produce theistic beliefs, is properly basic in the sense that the theist typically does not accept it on the evidential basis of other beliefs. He 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

- (1) I see a dog in the field,
- (2) I had coffee and sandwich for breakfast,
- (3) Sean, Kean, and Samantha 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 from other beliefs or propositions. Plantinga clarifies, however, that what is

²⁹ G. MAVRODES, “Jerusalem and Athens Revisited,” in A. PLANTINGA–N. WOLTERSTORFF (eds.) *Faith and Rationality. Reason and Belief in God*, p. 195.

³⁰ A. PLANTINGA, “Is Belief in God Properly Basic?” p. 42.

³¹ See A. PLANTINGA, “The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology,” Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, 54 (1980) pp. 49-53. Reprinted in M. PETERSON – W. HASKER – B. REICHENBACH – D. BASINGER (eds.) *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, Oxford University Press, New York 1996, pp. 309-321.

properly basic is not really the simple belief that *there is such a person as God* or that *God exists*.³² 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.

Therefore that belief in God is properly basic means, for Plantinga, 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, Sean believes that there is a tree before him. He does not hold this belief on the basis of other beliefs. He 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." The evidentialists would say that it is only if the man does such reasoning that his belief is justified. But Plantinga argues that apropos perceptual belief, we normally do not make any reasoning at all in the sense that we

³² Cf. A. PLANTINGA, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" p. 46.

base a belief with still another belief. Sean's belief that there is a tree before him is not the conclusion of inferential reasoning, but is formed in him on the occasion of having that characteristic experience of perceiving a tree.

The same holds for belief in other minds. For example, upon seeing Kean, Jan Mariel, and Samantha display pain behavior, Sean acquires the belief that they are in pain. Here Sean does not take the behavior he observes as *evidence* for his belief. He does not hold his belief on the basis of the displayed behavior, nor of any other beliefs he has. He does not say, "it always happens that every time I see a person display pain behavior, he is in fact in pain. I observe that Kean, Jan Mariel, and Samantha are displaying that characteristic pain behavior; therefore they must be in pain." What usually happens is that the displayed behavior Sean observes is the one that occasions the formation of the corresponding extrospective belief he now has. And here no reasoning whatsoever is involved.

Plantinga says that the same thing happens with regard to belief in God. The belief of the theist that, say, God forgives him, is not a conclusion of an 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.

E. Is There a Need for Natural Theology?

We have seen earlier that, for Plantinga, there is no need for natural theology to defend the rationality of belief in God. There are at least two reasons why he believes doing natural theology is not the best thing to defend that the proposition *God exists* is rational. First, Plantinga considered natural theology as a form of evidentialism. He assumed that its practitioners maintained that theistic belief needs evidence to be rational. But since he believed that evidentialism is rooted on classical foundationalism, an epis-

temological theory which he argued to be self-referentially incoherent,³³ the natural theology project is not sustainable. According to Plantinga, classical foundationalism "is a picture of looking at faith, knowledge, justified belief, rationality, and allied topics."³⁴ The main thesis of classical foundationalism is that there are two kinds of propositions: non-basic propositions or propositions that need the evidential support of basic propositions; and basic propositions or propositions that can stand alone since they are self-evident or evident to the senses. The self-referential incoherence of classical foundationalism lies in that it requires that non-basic proposition must have evidence to support it to be considered rational unless of course it is self-evident or evident to the senses. But that requirement itself is not self-evident nor is supported by evidence. Thus it violates its own rule. Second, the fact that belief in God is, in his proposal, a properly basic belief, there is no need for arguments to *make* it rational. For Plantinga, belief in God is *already* rational.³⁵ Like belief in other minds or perceptual beliefs, no amount of arguments can make theistic belief more rational than it is now. In other words, by including theistic belief among the list of properly basic or common sense beliefs, Plantinga is saying that that belief must be taken not as a conclusion but as a premise. But is it really the case that natural theology is unnecessary for the rationality of theistic belief, granted that it is properly basic? Indeed it seems to us that there has been a change in Plantinga regarding this point.

E.1. There Is No Need for Natural Theology

In his early essays, Plantinga insisted that natural theology or what he calls 'positive apologetics' is not only unnecessary to justify belief in God, but also the theist ought not to hold theistic belief on the basis of the traditional arguments from natural theology.³⁶ Otherwise if the theist is to be epistemically responsible, he

³³ Cf. A. PLANTINGA, *RBG*, pp. 61 ff and A. PLANTINGA, *WCB*, pp. 93 ff.

³⁴ A. PLANTINGA, *RBG*, p. 48.

³⁵ Cf. G. MAVRODES, "Jerusalem and Athens Revisited," in A. PLANTINGA -N. WOLTERSTORFF (eds.) *Faith and Rationality. Reason and Belief in God*. University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1983, p. 195.

³⁶ Cf. A. PLANTINGA, *RBG*, p. 67.

must always be checking the philosophical and theological journals to see whether someone has offered an effective defeater to those arguments. Even if by chance a natural theologian were able to formulate a valid and successful argument for God's existence, the theist should not base the rationality of his belief on that argument. The primordial task of a Christian philosopher or any Christian for that matter is not to be looking for evidence, proofs or arguments for the existence of God to have the epistemic right to hold such belief. On the contrary, he can and he *must* start from the proposition that God exists.

What I want to urge is that the Christian philosophical community ought *not* to think of itself as engaged in this common effort to determine the probability or philosophical plausibility of belief in God. The Christian philosopher quite properly *starts from* the existence of God, and presupposes it in philosophical work, whether or not he can show it to be probable or plausible with respect to premises accepted by all philosophers, or most philosophers, or most philosophers at the great contemporary centers of philosophy.³⁷

Therefore Plantinga believed that doing natural theology is not only misguided, but also even an exercise in futility. True enough, one does not start proving that $1 + 1 = 2$ or that other minds exist, to begin doing mathematics or counseling. Mathematicians and guidance counselors typically take it for granted that $1 + 1 = 2$ and that there are other minds. Plantinga suggested that the same thing must be said of belief in God for the Christian philosopher. For him, arguments do not make belief in God more rational than without them.

But while Plantinga rejected natural theology or positive apologetics, he underscored the need for what he calls 'negative apologetics', which is also known as the defeater-defeater system. He defines negative apologetics as "the attempt to defend Christian belief against the various attacks that have been brought against it: the argument from evil, for example, or the claim that science has

³⁷ A. PLANTINGA, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1984) pp. 260-261.

somehow shown Christian belief wanting.”³⁸ Plantinga says that the problem with these objections to belief in God is that they can and do cause confusion among believers. They may even lead some theists to waver in their faith in God. The role of negative apologetics is to refute those objections and consequently let the believers know that such objections need not cause them to doubt their faith. Aside from that, negative apologetics can also be useful for those who are not yet believers but are somehow entertaining the possibility of joining the believing community. Perhaps, upon knowing that there is no cogent or powerful objection to theism, they may be encouraged to finally embrace theism. In fact it can also be useful even for those who staunchly oppose theism in the sense that once they really see their arguments refuted by the theists, they will move closer to it. Thus while Plantinga opposed natural theology or positive apologetics, he defended the need for negative apologetics which he does not consider as a way of doing natural theology. The main difference between positive apologetics and negative apologetics is that in the former, the theist presents arguments for the existence of God, whereas in the latter, he only needs to refute the objections against His existence.

E.2. There Is A Need for Natural Theology

Several authors disagree with Plantinga that there is no need for natural theology to defend the rationality of theistic belief. In the very first place John Beversluis says that the reason why Calvin rejected natural theology was different and even incompatible with the ones referred to by Plantinga. Beversluis says that unlike Plantinga, Calvin did not object to rational demonstrations for the existence of God. Calvin was even “perfectly willing – indeed eager – to grant that human testimonies in the form of rational demonstrations are not useless,”³⁹ for while they may not be the source of the theist’s belief in God, they may serve as confirmations of it.

³⁸ A. PLANTINGA, “Christian Philosophy at the End of the 20th Century,” in J.F. SENNETT (ed) *The Analytic Theist. An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, Eerdmans, Michigan 1998, p. 336. (Reprinted from GRIFFIOEN – B. BALK (eds.) *Christian Philosophy at the Close of the Twentieth Century*, Kok, Campen 1995, pp 29-53).

³⁹ J. BEVERLUIS, “Reforming the ‘Reformed’ Objection to Natural Theology,” *Faith and Philosophy*, 12 (1995) pp. 197-198.

Beverluis explicates that Calvin's opposition to natural theology was not on the issue that belief in God is properly basic and for that reason does not need argument to validate it. Calvin was more concerned in criticizing natural theologians who involve themselves more in 'cold and frivolous' speculations about the essence of God rather than in being acquainted personally and spiritually with Him.⁴⁰

Moreover, Kretzmann says that the so-called 'Reformed objection to natural theology' was actually a religious objection not to natural theology itself but to one application of it. Besides the Reformers were protesting on religious grounds, and not epistemological or philosophical, that belief in God should be based on evidence.⁴¹ Kretzmann thus argues that Plantinga has over-interpreted the intention and extent of the religious objection of the reformers to natural theology.

Furthermore, Anthony Kenny maintains that albeit belief in God may be basic in the sense of not being accepted on the basis of argument, the theist needs to give reasons to defend and or explain it to others.⁴² Greg Welty agrees. He offers two reasons why he believes there is a need for natural theology: pastoral need and the need for arguments to defend or recommend theistic belief. Quoting William Hasker who says that although arguments of natural theology are not absolutely essential to justify religious belief, they contribute to an overall case for the rationality of belief in God,

⁴⁰ The question whether Calvin accepted an informal sort of natural theology was the center of the famous debate between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner in the 1930's. Emil Brunner argued that Calvin did admit what Brunner called 'Christian natural theology'. Karl Barth objected. He said that Calvin never affirmed that there is knowledge of God apart from the knowledge of God the redeemer. See D. STEINMETZ, *Calvin in Context*, Oxford University Press, New York 1995, pp. 23-25; E. BRUNNER-K. BARTH, *Natural Theology*, P. FRAENKEL (trans.) Geoffrey Bles, London, 1946.

⁴¹ N. KRETZMANN, *The Metaphysics of Theism. Aquinas' Natural Theology in Summa Contra Gentiles I*, Oxford University Press, New York 1997, pp. 19-20.

⁴² Cf. A. KENNY, *Faith and Reason*, Columbia University Press, New York 1983, p. 35. The original quote runs: "So a belief may be basic in the sense of not being held on the basis of reason, but yet defensible to others by the giving of reasons." (Cited in G. WELTY, *On God Being 'Evident to the Senses'* World Wide Web Page, (URL: <http://home.clara.net/welty/greg/docs/proper.html>) (Visited: 18/12/1999.)

Welty believes that arguments may be needed to exhort pastorally believing but wavering and discouraged theists. For even if belief in God is properly basic, theists may still be perplexed and confused in matters related to the existence of God. It is therefore to their advantage if they can avail of arguments that could strengthen their confidence in God. Secondly, Welty also explains that anent the need for natural theology to defend theism, "perhaps one can *acquire* belief in God such that it is properly basic, and can perhaps rationally *maintain* that properly basic belief as an intrinsic defeater of any potential defeaters, but yet require the help of natural theology in order to defend or *recommend* that belief to others, who do not find themselves able to profess belief in God."⁴³

Further still, Mark McLeod argues that since Christians need background Christian beliefs to generate religious beliefs with specifically Christian content, Plantinga needs to explain what justifies those background Christian beliefs.⁴⁴ One possible answer is to claim that it is the religious experience that grounds Christian belief. But if this is the case Plantinga must explain why religious belief produced in a 'Christian' cognitive faculty is always a 'Christian' theistic belief, say, a belief whose content includes the idea that God is a personal, loving and forgiving being, even if there is nothing explicitly Christian in the phenomenon that triggered the experience. Plantinga must answer this problem unless of course he is willing to admit that a Christian has a cognitive device in his cognitive faculties that allows him to apprehend phenomena differently from non-Christians and non-theists, a device that non-Christians and non-theists do not have.

On the other hand, David Basinger says that the existence of pervasive religious pluralism does seriously and directly challenge the sufficiency and adequacy of negative apologetics. The fact that the theist is aware that there are different religions proclaiming that each is the true one, he must do more than just defend his religious beliefs against possible attacks if he wants to be rationally responsible. "[O]nce the theist becomes aware of the pluralistic

⁴³ Cf. G. WELTY, On God Being 'Evident to the Senses.' Word Wide Web. <http://home.clara.net/welty/greg/docs/proper.html> (Visited: 18/12/1999)

⁴⁴ Cf. M. MCLEOD, *Rationality and Theistic Belief. An Essay on Reformed Epistemology*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1993, p. 194.

challenge, she can no longer justifiably choose to retain a purely defensive posture (...) If she desires to determine the 'truth' of the matter to the extent possible, she is obligated, in principle, to engage in further investigation. The arena of positive apologetics must at least be entered. The game of 'negative apologetics' will no longer be enough."⁴⁵

Another author who defends the importance of reasoning is John Greco. Greco says that it might be that properly functioning theists need to employ both their reason as well as their experience in having and in maintaining religious beliefs. In fact theists who rely solely on religious experience are more disposed to form mutually conflicting theistic beliefs, while theists who use their reason with experience tend to converge more in their beliefs.⁴⁶ Oftentimes our religious experiences are ephemeral, hazy or fleeting and not the forceful, mystical or Moses-before-the-burning-bush type. As Greco would have it, we are more like a child who senses the presence of a ghost than the man who meets his mother in the kitchen. We thus need to confront our doubts and to do just *that*, we need to use our reasoning faculties.

Moreover, Terrence Penelhum offers two reasons why natural theology is needed. First, the success of the natural theologian's arguments would show that his religious belief could be inferred, derived or taken from facts and standards non-theists and theists of other religious confessions recognize. Therefore the non-theist will be led to accept that belief in God is rational even according to his standards of rationality.⁴⁷ Second, by having arguments for God's existence, the theist can show that it is not that religious belief is irrational without arguments or evidence but rather it is irrational not to hold belief in God.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ D. BASINGER, "Plantinga, Pluralism and Justified Religious Belief," *Faith and Philosophy*, 8 (1991) p. 74.

⁴⁶ Cf. J. GRECO, "Catholics vs. Calvinists on Religious Knowledge," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 71 (1997) p. 33.

⁴⁷ Cf. T. PENELHUM, *God and Skepticism*, Reidel, Dordrecht 1983, p. 157.

⁴⁸ Other authors who defend the need for natural theology are the following: H. MEYNELL, "Faith, Foundationalism, and Wolterstorff," in L. ZAGZEBSKI (ed.) *Rational Faith. Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1993, pp. 79-109; J. ZEIS, "Natural Theology: Reformed," *Rational Faith. Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology*, pp. 48-78.

E.3. Natural Theology Is Useful

Recently, Plantinga seems to be softening in his opposition against natural theology. First of all he recognizes that he mischaracterized Thomas Aquinas, whom he earlier called the natural theologian *par excellence*.⁴⁹ In his early pieces, Plantinga described Aquinas to be holding that a proposition is properly basic for a person only if it is self-evident to him or evident to his senses. He said: "[W]e can get a better understanding of Aquinas... if we see (him) as accepting some version of classical *foundationalism*."⁵⁰ "Aquinas and Descartes, we might say, are strong foundationalists."⁵¹ In fact he thought Aquinas maintained that while we are still here on earth, it is not possible for us to have the knowledge that there is God, except on the basis of deductive argument from self-evident propositions.⁵² Hence Plantinga believed that "in at least one important strand of the broadly Thomistic tradition, the central function of natural theology is that of transforming faith into knowledge."⁵³

Nicholas Wolterstorff says, however, that it is not fair to identify the practice of modern evidentialist apologetics with the practice of natural theology among the medievals. The reason is that natural theology was, for them, a different project from the modern and contemporary apologetics. "Taking Anselm and Aquinas as typical, it becomes clear, then, that the medievals were doing something quite different in their project of natural theology from meeting the evidentialist challenge (...) No one in their milieu was claiming

⁴⁹ A. PLANTINGA, *RBG*, p. 40.

⁵⁰ A. PLANTINGA, *RBG*, p. 48.

⁵¹ A. PLANTINGA, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," p. 317.

⁵² Cf. A. PLANTINGA, "Self Profile," p. 63. As regards Aquinas' alleged foundationalist leaning, Ralph McInerny has this to say: "[Aquinas'] teaching on analogy and his application of it to talk about God seem clearly to put him among those who deny that truths about God can be basic for human knowers and that they must consequently be shown to be true by being grounded in what can be basic for humans, truths about sensible objects." "Analogy and Foundationalism in Thomas Aquinas," in R. AUDI-W.J. WAINWRIGHT (eds.) *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment. New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1986, p. 287.

⁵³ A. PLANTINGA, "The Prospects for Natural Theology," p. 288.

that it was permissible to believe that God existed only if one did so on the basis of adequate evidence, and with a firmness not exceeding the strength of the evidence.”⁵⁴ Plantinga was therefore not altogether right in his judgment about Aquinas and his natural theology project.

Moreover, Wolterstorff says that the aim of natural theology for Aquinas was not to arm theists with arguments for their belief but to enhance their happiness as creatures whose joy is to be found in the contemplation of God. “The enterprise of natural theology, for Aquinas, occurs within the overlapping projects of the development of science and the contemplation of God. It is not a response to concern about the rationality of religious belief. Though Aquinas believes that theism is indigenous to humanity, he never worries whether those who hold to that indigenous theism are responsible (rational, justified) in so doing. And most emphatically his natural theology is not a response to such a worry.”⁵⁵ Thus Plantinga misread Aquinas when he accused the medieval philosopher of being a foundationalist and when he assumed that natural theology is a

⁵⁴ N. WOLTERSTORFF, “Can belief in God be Rational if it has no Foundations?” in A. PLANTINGA–N. WOLTERSTORFF (eds.) *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1983, p. 141. Also, contrary to Plantinga’s assumption that natural theology is a form of evidentialism, Alister McGrath says that it is clearly not necessary that natural theology should have that role of *proving* the existence of God. “Indeed there are excellent reasons for suggesting that, as a matter of historical fact, natural theology is to be understood as a demonstration, from the standpoint of faith, of the consonance between that faith and the structures of the world. In other words, natural theology is not intended to prove the existence of God, but presupposes that existence.” A. MCGRATH, *The Foundations of Dialogue in Science and Religion*, Blackwell, Oxford 1998, pp. 107-108. Further, Hunter Brown also says that Plantinga’s view on natural theology as having that role of demonstrating the existence of God is mistaken. Cf. H. BROWN, “Alvin Plantinga and Natural Theology,” *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 30 (1991) pp. 1-19. Foreign to this debate but expressing the same thought of McGrath, O. H. Pesch has this to say on Aquinas: For Aquinas, “la demostración de la existencia de Dios en modo alguno se ha de entender como ascenso racional a un Dios antes desconocido, sino como aproximación lo más racional posible al Dios *conocido* ya desde siempre por la fe.” O. H. PESCH, *Tomás de Aquino*, Herder, Barcelona 1992, p. 156. (Italics of Pesch.)

⁵⁵ N. WOLTERSTORFF, “The Migration of the Theistic Arguments: From Natural Theology to Evidentialist Apologetics,” in R. AUDI–W. WAINWRIGHT (eds.) *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment. New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1986, p. 60.

form of evidentialism. Kenneth Konyndyk, a Reformed epistemologist himself, has a similar opinion on Plantinga's erroneous view of natural theology.⁵⁶

Furthermore, Eleonore Stump also disagrees with Plantinga on Aquinas. She argues that Aquinas was not a foundationalist and that his theory of knowledge was not a sort of classical foundationalism.⁵⁷ Stump explains that the term *scientia*, for Aquinas, is not equivalent to the contemporary English notion of knowledge.⁵⁸ The Latin term that expresses what the English term 'knowledge' does is probably '*notitia*'. Thus it is a mistake not only to translate '*scientia*' to 'knowledge' but also to interpret Aquinas' theory of *scientia* as a theory of knowledge.⁵⁹ John Greco holds a similar criticism against Plantinga, albeit he argues that Aquinas was a foundationalist but not a classical foundationalist.⁶⁰

Still further, Norman Kretzmann says that Plantinga has limited the notion of natural theology to the effort to demonstrate the existence of God. But that particular application of natural theology is not even the most important function of natural theology for Aquinas. Kretzmann says, "whatever opposition to natural theology Plantinga does clearly manifest is specifically directed against using it as source of epistemic justification for religious

⁵⁶ Cf. K. KONYNDYK, "Faith and Evidentialism," in R. AUDI – W. WAINWRIGHT (eds.) *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment. New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1986, pp. 85-91.

⁵⁷ E. STUMP, "Aquinas on the Foundations of Knowledge," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary Volume 17 (1991) pp. 125-158.

⁵⁸ Thomas Hibbs has the same opinion. He writes: "[T]he assumption of continuity between Thomas's vocabulary and that of recent analytic philosophy is dubious. The term *scientia* is not equivalent in meaning to "knowledge" in contemporary philosophy." T. HIBBS, "Aquinas, Virtue, and Recent Epistemology," *The Review of Metaphysics*, 52 (1999) pp. 579-580.

⁵⁹ The following are some of the authors who agree with Eleonore Stump's position: N. KRETZMANN, "Infallibility, Error, and Ignorance," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary Volume 17 (1991) p. 159; N. KRETZMANN, "Evidence Against Anti-Evidentialism," in K.J. CLARK (ed.) *Our Knowledge of God. Essays on Natural and Philosophical Theology*, Kluwer, Dordrecht 1992, p. 22; J. JENKINS, *CSC, Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, p. 122.

⁶⁰ Cf. J. GRECO, "Foundationalism and Philosophy of Religion," in B. DAVIES, OP (ed.) *Philosophy of Religion. A Guide to the Subject*, Cassell, London 1998, p. 34-40.

belief. Aquinas, however, doesn't expressly view his natural theology as having that role... his is designed to show that reason without revelation's support could have arrived at many – not all – of the propositions that constitute revelation. In that way, and to that extent, he is showing the unity of reason and faith."⁶¹

Confronted with all those objections, Plantinga was convinced he mistakenly called Aquinas a classical foundationalist. In his recent book *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga no longer mentions Aquinas among what he calls classical evidentialists and classical foundationalists. He says that Aquinas is an evidentialist only with respect to scientific knowledge, but not with respect to belief in God.⁶² But the more significant indication that Plantinga is softening in his opposition to natural theology is his recognition that arguments of natural theology may not be useless after all. In a letter to James F. Sennett Plantinga writes,

"[T]he 'Two Dozens (Or So) Theistic Arguments' came late: until two or three years ago I didn't think there was much by way of reasonably impressive theistic argument. Now, of course, I think quite differently. The reason is that I thought of the arguments of natural theology as having to meet the very high standards classical foundationalists hold up for them. It was only recently that it became apparent to me that there aren't any philosophical arguments or anything of significance that meet those standards; but clearly there are some good philosophical arguments; so a philosophical argument doesn't have to meet those standards to be a good one; so the same goes for arguments from natural theology."⁶³

Thus, whereas before Plantinga was sweeping in his rejection of natural theology, he now says it may be useful in some context.⁶⁴

⁶¹ N. KRETZMANN, *The Metaphysics of Theism. Aquinas's Natural Theology in Summa Contra Gentiles I*, p. 21.

⁶² Cf. A. PLANTINGA, *WCB*, p. 82 n.

⁶³ Cited in J.F. SENNETT, *Modality, Probability, and Rationality: A Critical Examination of Alvin Plantinga's Philosophy*, Peter Lang, New York 1992, p. 43. The letter is dated August 10, 1988.

⁶⁴ Cf. R. VARGHESE, *An Interview with Professor Alvin Plantinga*, *Truth Journal*, World Wide Web Page (URL: <http://campus.leaderu.com/truth/3truth06.html>) (Visited: October 16, 1999.)

While he still maintains that arguments of natural theology are not necessary to justify theistic belief, he admits that they are not without value. Plantinga cites two relevant roles for theistic arguments.⁶⁵ First, theistic arguments could be of some help for those who do not believe in God in the sense that they can persuade them to belief. In fact, there were cases of people who embraced the Christian faith after being acquainted with demonstrations or arguments of His existence. Second, theistic arguments could also be of value to believers. They can help boost the faith and confidence of doubting believers.

Moreover, in the same interview conducted by Roy Varghese, the executive editor of *Truth Journal*, Plantinga explicates that he does not have any objection to giving theistic arguments. He says that arguments are not only useful in triggering off the insight into the existence of God, but also they could reveal connections between God and other things a person already believes like morality, order in the universe and so on. In this sense, theistic arguments could even move people closer to hold belief in the existence of God. Better still, Plantinga admits that theistic belief can even get warrant from the arguments of natural theology.⁶⁶

(Thus) even if (theistic) arguments are not needed for theistic belief to have warrant (even if they are not the sole source of warrant for theistic belief), it doesn't follow that they cannot play the role of *increasing* warrant, and *significantly* increasing warrant (...) Perhaps my belief in God, while accepted in the basic way, isn't firm and unwavering; perhaps it isn't nearly as firm as my belief in other minds. Then perhaps good theistic arguments could play the role of confirming and strengthening my belief in God, and in that way they might increase the degree of warrant belief in God has for me. Indeed, such arguments might increase the degree of warrant of that belief in such a way as to nudge it over the boundary separating knowledge from mere true belief;

⁶⁵ Cf. A. PLANTINGA, "Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century," pp. 338-339.

⁶⁶ Cf. A. PLANTINGA, *WCB*, p. 179 n.

they might in some cases therefore serve something like the Thomistic project of transforming belief into knowledge.⁶⁷

Therefore unlike his earlier position, Plantinga now seems to recognize that the arguments of natural theology may, in some cases, even be needed to convert theistic belief into knowledge.⁶⁸ Likewise, Plantinga seems to suggest in the above text that to have recourse to natural theology when one is wavering in his belief in God may not only be not misleading or downright blasphemous as some Reformed theologians would call it, but may even be intellectually and spiritually useful. In the final analysis, this is an implicit admission that an epistemologically responsible and at the same time doubting theist may even need to resort to natural theology to be rational in maintaining belief in God. Recently, Plantinga has acknowledged that his epistemological project can even be developed in such a way that it can accommodate natural theology. He cites Michael Sudduth's piece, "Prospects for 'Mediate' Natural Theology in John Calvin"⁶⁹ as an example of how his project could be developed in that direction.⁷⁰

Finally, in his programmatic sketch of Christian philosophy inspired from Augustine,⁷¹ Plantinga finds at least four elements in Christian philosophy: philosophical theology, negative and positive apologetics, Christian philosophical criticism, and positive Christian

⁶⁷ A. PLANTINGA, "The Prospect for Natural Theology," in J.E. TOMBERLIN (ed) *Philosophical Perspectives*, 5, *Philosophy of Religion*, Ridgeview, Atascadero 1991, pp. 311-312. (Plantinga's emphases.)

⁶⁸ In the final analysis this is an implicit recognition that a totally externalist epistemology which Plantinga is defending may not be enough to defend the rationality of belief in God. By acknowledging that arguments may at certain times even be necessary to transform belief into knowledge, Plantinga seems to be saying that some form of internalism may even be necessary to warrant belief in God. For a study on the possible internalist features of Plantinga's religious epistemology, see M. C. SUDDUTH, "The Internalist Character and Evidentialist Implications of Plantingian Defeaters," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 45 (1999) pp. 167-187.

⁶⁹ Published in *Religious Studies* 31 (1995) p. 53-68.

⁷⁰ Cf. A. PLANTINGA, *WCB*, p. 176, n.

⁷¹ See A. PLANTINGA, "Augustinian Christian Philosophy," *The Monist*, 75 (1992) pp. 291-320.

philosophy or natural theology. Now Plantinga laments that the discussions in natural theology have been dominated by two assumptions. First, that a good theistic argument would need to be demonstrative and would meet the extremely high standards of logic. Second, it must have premises accepted by nearly everyone. He says, however, that there is hardly any philosophical argument that is demonstrative as there is hardly any philosophical argument that has premises accepted by nearly everyone. Therefore that a theistic argument may not be strictly demonstrative nor have premises accepted by almost everyone does not mean that it is not a good theistic argument. A third problem Plantinga notes is that the discussion of theistic arguments has been generally limited to the traditional three arguments: ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments. He says there are actually more good theistic arguments only that they are not given enough attention.

F. Conclusions

Indeed, it seems that Plantinga has realized that he cannot just dispense with the role of natural theology in doing religious epistemology without falling either to subjectivism or to uncertainties with regard to one's belief in God. This is especially true in the case of Plantinga who seemed at first to base his defense of the rationality of belief in God almost on religious experience alone. Pope John Paul II has recently highlighted this danger in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*. Pope John Paul II warns that when faith is deprived of reason it cannot but stress feeling and experience, and so runs the risk of no longer being a universal proposition. Thus a defense of faith based solely on religious experiences and not on reasons is very much open to subjectivism and even solipsism. John Paul II writes: "It is an illusion to think that faith, tied to weak reasoning, might be more penetrating; on the contrary, faith then runs the grave risk of withering into myth or superstition."⁷² Without the aid of natural theology, we cannot but see Plantinga's defense of belief in the existence of God among those attempts at defending theism that Pope John Paul II warns of running the risk of not being universally valid. □

⁷² J. PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio*, n. 48.