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# Let Reason Be Your Guide ?

A Brief Introduction to  
Reformed Epistemology

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**RANDAL RAUSER**

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## **A Brief Introduction to Reformed Epistemology**

Randal Rauser

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## Let Reason Be Your Guide

On March 27, 1997 police raided the headquarters of the mysterious 'Heaven's Gate' cult in Sante Ranche, California. Within minutes the terrible news flashed around the world: thirty-nine people were found dead. As the days rolled by, the grim story unfolded: the members, motivated by the teaching of their charismatic leader 'Do' were convinced that there was a space ship following the Hale-Bop comet which had at the time been fast approaching earth. They believed that if they committed mass suicide at the appropriate moment, they would be resurrected into a higher level of being, at which point they would rendezvous with the space ship to enjoy a new life in paradise. Not surprisingly, this 'explanation' only raised further questions: who could believe such a thing? On what authority did the cult members accept Do's bizarre teaching? On what *evidence*?

The tragedy of Sante Ranche is just one more example of the devastating consequences that can result from the types of beliefs people hold. There are indeed many beliefs which, like those of the Heaven's Gate members, are potentially dangerous, not only for those who hold them, but for others as well: consider theories of racial superiority or the belief that the red light at intersections means 'go'. There are many more beliefs that, while appearing more innocuous, are nonetheless dangerous. Imagine a graduate student applying for a research fellowship in economics to improve the economy in Ireland who describes his project as follows: 'I propose to conduct research on devising a new method to catch leprechauns with maximal efficiency in order to deprive them of their gold. We could then use this gold to revitalise the economy.' Here we would agree the viability of the young man's project is somewhat inhibited by his initial belief that there are in fact leprechauns. (And as a result, we likely wouldn't feel comfortable with him as baby-sitter for our children!) All these various beliefs in celestial resurrection, racial superiority, and leprechauns share a common element. It seems somehow that these beliefs are held irresponsibly, without sufficient reason. But why is that? To gain a handle on the problem we will first take a journey back to the 1600s, when the Enlightenment was just coming into its own.

The famous philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) lived through a tumultuous time in European political, social and religious history. While Locke did not encounter members of the Heaven's Gate or believers in leprechauns, he was little pleased by what he did see: a proliferation of pietistic Christian sects who shunned reason in favour of a personal experience of God. For Locke, the beliefs these people held were bizarre *and* potentially destructive. Locke felt strongly that such groups were not believing in an appropriate manner, and in his most famous work, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, he set out to explain why. We can all sympathise with Locke's concerns: it seems there should be some external measure apart from personal experience and convictions to judge the propriety of one's beliefs. As Locke put it: 'if strength of persuasion be the light which must guide us, I ask, how shall anyone distinguish between the delusions of Satan, and the inspirations of the Holy Ghost?'<sup>1</sup> In short, what good is sincerity when one can be sincerely wrong? Locke concluded that under the guidance of reason, those beliefs that are not themselves certain must be confirmed by evidence (a view called evidentialism). Locke's suggested maxim for such an objective standard became the rallying cry for the Enlightenment: 'Reason must be our last judge and guide in everything.' (416) When Locke said everything, he meant *everything*: even *God* must not violate the canons of reason. Locke argued that any supposed revelation or experience of the Almighty must be evaluated by reason, and only accepted if it passes the test. Locke's rationale was simple: God was himself eminently reasonable and consequently would not offend our rational sensibilities (one can surmise that given this standard Abraham would never have climbed Mount Moriah to sacrifice his son Isaac). According to reason, one must always apportion belief to the evidence that can be adduced for it.

As a devoted Christian, Locke was convinced there *was* sufficient evidence to render Christian faith, unlike that of the radical sects,

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<sup>1</sup> *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, abridged and with notes by A.S. Pringle-Pattison. (Great Britain: Wordsworths Editions, Ltd, 1998), 416. This quote occurs in a chapter on 'Enthusiasm' which means, exuberant religions experience over-against rational reflection.

rational. While Locke's arguments for Christianity, and others like them, were accepted for a time, it was not long until they came under fire. Classical philosophical arguments (or proofs) for the existence of God were attacked by philosophers like David Hume (1711–76) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) while the authority of the Bible was undermined by biblical scholars like David Strauss (1808–74). Many people believed that the death knell for Christianity came with Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, allowing Richard Dawkins to reflect that at last with Darwin it was possible to be an 'intellectually fulfilled atheist'.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, consensus was growing that it was not possible to be an intellectually fulfilled (or even responsible!) Christian. It was in this shifting intellectual climate that William Clifford delivered his famous essay, 'The Ethics of Belief' which reduced Locke's arguments into a bracing dictum: 'it is wrong, everywhere, always, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.'<sup>3</sup> While Clifford never mentions religion in his famous essay, it was obvious to all concerned that his primary target was indeed the stone and gabled churches of Christendom. Every sermon, hymn and prayer was no longer a sign of piety but rather a testament to the stubborn irrationality of the human animal, determined to cling to belief without, and even against, the evidence. Despite the continuing efforts of Christian intellectuals to provide persuasive philosophical and historical arguments in the court of reason, the jury's verdict had already come in: Guilty! The sentence? Exile in intellectual and cultural obscurity alongside the space-ship cultists and leprechaun pundits.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (London: Norton, 1986): 6, 7.

<sup>3</sup> William Clifford, 'The Ethics of Belief,' from *Lectures and Essays*, (New York: Macmillan, 1901) reprinted in *Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions*. Eleonore Sump and Michael J. Murray, eds. (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 1999): 273.

## Finding a New Guide

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy which deals with theories of what knowledge is and how we come to know what we know. John Locke's epistemology, which has been such a persistent presence in the modern world, is one example of a broad approach to epistemology known as 'foundationalism'. The general theory of foundationalism can perhaps best be understood against its chief rival, coherentism. Let us consider their respective answers to the question of how our beliefs hold together (or, how our noetic structure is composed). The common metaphor coherentists use to describe this structure is that of a web; for the coherentist all our beliefs form an intrinsic whole and are equally important.<sup>4</sup> The foundationalist prefers the metaphor of a pyramid because she believes that we have two types of belief: those which are properly basic because they carry their own self-evidence, and those which are properly non-basic because they derive their justification from basic beliefs. We may refer to that basic thesis as 'simple foundationalism', and it provides the theoretical framework from which all foundationalist theories, including that of John Locke, are derived. In constructing a building, one needs to begin with a secure foundation, and the foundationalist believes the same is true in our noetic structures. But what is it to have a secure foundation for our beliefs? In other words, what characteristics do beliefs require to be properly basic? Like Locke, many foundationalists have added that the only sufficient foundation is that of *certainty*, a theory which has resulted in two sources of belief being identified as properly basic: incorrigible beliefs and self-evident beliefs. Let us call this more complex theory 'strong foundationalism'.<sup>5</sup> In

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<sup>4</sup> This is of course a great generalisation, and many coherentists would qualify the statement in various ways.

<sup>5</sup> It is very difficult to formulate a standard terminology when discussing foundationalism as confusion and terminological plurality abounds. I will follow this basic distinction between simple foundationalism, strong foundationalism, and a third type called moderate foundationalism. And as I engage with Wolterstorff, Alston and Plantinga I will employ these standardised terms while noting how their own terms differ.



summary then, simple foundationalism subscribes to a tiered noetic structure, while strong foundationalism adds that the base of this structure must be comprised of certain beliefs. The strong foundationalist framework has influenced philosophers at least since the time of Aristotle. In fact, strong foundationalism in its various permutations has been so successful that it has often maintained a monopoly, particularly since the time of Descartes and Locke. The result has been that many philosophers came to believe that strong foundationalism was simply the truth of the matter. However, in recent years a startling development has occurred: a general consensus within philosophy has concluded that strong foundationalism lacks its own sufficient foundation – the emperor of epistemology, who has reigned since Aristotle (or at least since Descartes), has no clothes!

We will consider some of the reasons for the collapse of strong foundationalism in due course, but suffice it to say at this point that there has been much disagreement as regards the implications of its collapse. Let us consider two responses in the context of a famous urban legend of philosophy. There was once a philosophy professor who presented his students with a unique final exam. Standing at the front of the class he pointed at a chair and said: 'You have two hours to answer one question. *Prove* this chair exists.' As the story goes, the only student who got a perfect score simply wrote two words: 'What chair?' This story has important analogies with the current situation in epistemology. We can think of the demand that the existence of the chair be proved as a challenge to demonstrate that strong foundationalism is true. However, no student can prove with absolute certainty that the chair really is in front of him. The student who handed in the shortest essay recognised that the task of proving the chair exists is futile and so he rejected the strong foundationalist demand by writing 'What chair?'. This student's 'essay' reflects the anti-realist response to the dilemma, one that is quite popular in that broad intellectual movement known as 'postmodernism'. That student reasons (1) I cannot *prove* that the chair is there; therefore (2) I cannot know (or perhaps even reasonably believe) that the chair is there. But there is a crucial assumption that the student has accepted from strong foundationalism: *that certainty is a viable criterion for properly basic*

*beliefs*. The implications of this view are startling: if we cannot achieve the certainty that objective knowledge requires, we are limited to knowledge of our own opinions.<sup>6</sup> But this entails the forfeiture of any right to judge aberrant belief systems like that of the Heaven's Gate cult. If I cannot be sure there is a chair in front of me, how can I be sure it is the cultist who is being irrational?' Does he not simply express another opinion, equally valid to my own?

This seems a rather sorry state of affairs. But let's add to the story another student who hands in an equally short essay: 'Why *certainty*?' As we saw, the first student accepted the strong foundationalist premise that certainty is necessary for knowledge. But the second student sees two alternatives: accepting the premise along with its anti-realist and relativistic conclusions, or rejecting the certainty requirement altogether. And he wisely chooses the latter course. This response suggests at least the possibility of a third way between strong foundationalism and post-modernism, and there are in fact a number of philosophers who have responded by advocating such a 'middle way'. The view held by those philosophers who both pursue a middle way and retain a simple foundationalism as regards noetic structure espouse a view called moderate foundationalism. One such group of philosophers shall be our focus, those belonging to a movement called 'Reformed

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<sup>6</sup> There is here an important distinction to be drawn between 'objective knowledge' and 'subjective knowledge'. The former is true whether or not anyone believes it. To take an obvious example,  $1 + 1 = 2$  is not decided by opinions, and even if everyone in the world disbelieved it, it would still be true. In that sense it is objective. By contrast, subjective truth is that which is dependent on one's opinion. Two people can disagree on whether a type of music is enjoyable (e.g. heavy metal). To such disagreements, one can say 'It may be true that heavy metal is enjoyable for you, but it is not good for me'. This is the realm of subjective judgement. But some wish to extend this realm of subjective judgement to the realm of objective truths, the most stark example being ' $1 + 1 = 2$  may be true for you but not for me' or 'Murder is evil may be true for you but not for me'.

<sup>7</sup> You may be wondering at this point what the relationship between postmodern epistemology and coherentist epistemology is. In fact, the relationship is very complicated. While a number of coherentist philosophers are, like moderate foundationalists (who I note below) seeking a middle way, it is also true that a number of postmodern epistemologists find a coherentist framework particularly congenial to their views.

epistemology', so named because it draws inspiration from Christian Reformed theology.<sup>8</sup> While they have a concern with broadly epistemological issues, given the fact that Reformed epistemologists are Christians, they also have a particular interest in challenging strong foundationalism's evidentialist attack on Christian belief. Reformed epistemologists agree (1) that the loss of certainty does not entail the loss of objective truth and thus the discipline of epistemology as it has traditionally been pursued; (2) that Christianity is *not* irrational or intellectually second-rate. While a number of epistemologists pursuing this middle way have argued the first premise, the Reformed epistemologists have made a particularly valuable contribution to the second. In what follows we will consider aspects of this exciting new epistemology (or group of epistemologies) by engaging three of its major exponents. First we will consider Nicholas Wolterstorff's formative work, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*.<sup>9</sup> Second, we will review William Alston's magisterial book *Perceiving God*.<sup>10</sup> Finally, we will turn to Alvin Plantinga's seminal essay 'Reason and Belief in God'<sup>11</sup> and his most recent book, *Warranted Christian Belief*.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Some Reformed theologians have accepted crucial assumptions from strong foundationalism, but others like John Calvin and Abraham Kuyper were sharply critical of this approach to knowledge and evidence. Reformed epistemologists see themselves as providing philosophical reasons for the rejection of strong foundationalism by Calvin, Kuyper, and others.

<sup>9</sup> *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> *Perceiving God*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991). While William Alston does not consider himself a 'Reformed epistemologist' his own epistemology has close ties with the movement.

<sup>11</sup> Plantinga, 'Reason and Belief in God', in *Faith and Rationality*, Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

<sup>12</sup> *Warranted Christian Belief*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

## Wolterstorff

Nicholas Wolterstorff offers a powerful critique of strong foundationalism in *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*. Wolterstorff is concerned with how a Christian should be a scholar and specifically what impact one's Christian faith should have on forming and evaluating theories about the world in all sorts of disciplines. With this end in mind, he engages in a critique of the constraint of certainty that strong foundationalism places on theorising. Wolterstorff defines strong foundationalism as the position that a theory can only be accepted if it belongs to genuine science<sup>13</sup> which is limited to those truths which are justified by a foundational proposition which is known with certitude: 'A proposition is *foundational* if and only if it is true and some human being could know noninferentially and with certitude that it is true.' (29, emphasis in original)

I said above that the foundationalist is committed to the view that there are basic and non-basic beliefs, and the latter must be related to the former. But how does one go about properly relating non-basic beliefs to those that are basic? Wolterstorff points to deduction as the predominant method by which a theory is allegedly justified with respect to the foundations. Deduction involves drawing out a conclusion from facts which are already known. Consider this syllogism:

- (1) All swans are birds.
- (2) All birds have wings.
- (3) Therefore, all swans have wings.

If I know that all swans are birds and that all birds have wings, I can deduce rather easily a conclusion that has the required certainty of strong foundationalism: all swans have wings. While this is very neat on paper, as Wolterstorff notes, there are debilitating problems with applying deduction to the real world. The problem is as follows: how do we know the above syllogism

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<sup>13</sup> Wolterstorff appears to use the term science here in the general sense of 'knowledge'.

corresponds to reality? If we require certainty in properly basic beliefs, as strong foundationalism demands, then I must know with *certainty* that all birds have wings. To do that I would have to be able to confirm that all birds (and thus all swans) have wings. But how does one come to know that sort of truth with certainty? Consider that I went into business full time tagging and cataloguing all the birds I saw with wings. To have the degree of certainty required, I would have to have verified that *every bird* there is has wings. Only that would give me the certainty that strong foundationalism requires for knowledge. But would it? It is at least *possible* that a spaceship could land on earth which is flown by a highly developed form of swan that has no wings (philosophers love bizarre examples like this for making a point). The point is that it is not *certain* that I have catalogued *every* bird and so verified the claim. It is simply impractical, indeed impossible, to verify in one let alone all such pieces of knowledge the certainty required to satisfy strong foundationalism. Hence, deduction fails.

In response, some strong foundationalists have adopted the more modest approach of probabilism whereby a theory is part of true science if it is probable.<sup>14</sup> But this creates its own difficulties: on what basis can you deem a hypothesis 'probable'? The problems start immediately. How do you show it is probable that nature is an orderly place such that regularity and probability are meaningful descriptors of it? It seems you cannot; rather you have to assume it. What about the rule of inference? Is this a legitimate form of reasoning? It is not itself known with certainty and indeed cannot be known (in the strong foundationalist way) to even be probable. Recognising these daunting problems, some strong foundationalists, resilient as always, have proposed the band-aid theory of falsificationism. Rather than attempt to delineate what *is* legitimate 'scientific' knowledge, this approach focuses on the more modest goal of establishing what is *not* science: namely, that which cannot, in principle, be falsified. The logic behind this position is as follows. Empirical science is the only way to get certain knowledge

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<sup>14</sup> This view can perhaps be seen as an unhappy compromise between some of the assumptions of strong foundationalism and those of a more moderate foundationalism. Wolterstorff demonstrates that the compromise is untenable.

and one important criterion of valid scientific theories is that they can be proved false. For this reason scientists seek to test and falsify their own theories before accepting them. The strong foundationalist then argues that falsification should be accepted as a general criterion for knowledge. But this creates an immediate problem, for while theories may be falsifiable under strictly controlled laboratory conditions, how would one set the conditions to falsify a person's belief in God, or leprechauns? Just think about it for a minute. How would you *prove* to your friend (in the strong foundationalist sense) that there are no leprechauns? You could provide very good evidence against his belief, but it would not be certain. For instance, your friend could counter your evidence by responding that leprechauns can only be seen by those who believe in them, thus explaining why *you* have never seen them. While extremely unlikely, his hypothesis could at least save his belief from ever being falsified. For this reason, such belief as that in God or leprechauns allegedly cannot be science, while a belief that all swans have wings could by virtue of its falsification potential.<sup>15</sup> Wolterstorff is equally critical of this approach. For one thing, he notes that falsification is not a sure sign of a theory's being disqualified: sometimes when a scientist's theory is contradicted, she will choose to defend rather than give it up because it exists within a web of belief, and often such a seemingly unjustified intuition is vindicated.<sup>16</sup> Hence, there seem to be further beliefs the scientist has which control theorising and at times correctly overrule the demands of falsification. Clearly then it is wrong to absolutise this property into a general criterion of knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

Wolterstorff then turns to consider whether the venerable strong foundationalist criterion of indubitable certainty actually exists in

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<sup>15</sup> For an application of this criterion to belief in God see Antony Flew's famous parable of the invisible gardener, which is often reprinted. 'Theology and Falsification', in *The Existence of God*, John Hick, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1964).

<sup>16</sup> Here 'web of belief' is not referring specifically to a coherentist theory, but only to the interconnection of our beliefs.

<sup>17</sup> A more basic problem is that the falsificationist theory is based on a maxim which cannot itself be falsified!

any proposition we hold. Considering the avenues that have already been closed (deduction, probabilism, falsification), are there any propositions about non-inferential objects which one can know with certainty to be true? Let's say you walk into a coffee shop and see me sitting there with green hair (a particularly handsome shade of mint). Can you know that I have green hair with certainty?<sup>18</sup> One of the most enduring insights of epistemology is the importance of distinguishing between the appearance of things and things as they are. So perhaps it could be that my hair only appears green because of the light. Or maybe you have a neurological disorder that makes my wild brown locks appear green to you. Or could it be that I am not even sitting in the coffee shop, but that in fact you are simply hallucinating or dreaming? Now you may rightly reject all these options and conclude that I am indeed there and that I do have green hair, and you could well be right. The point is that you don't know that with the certainty that strong foundationalism requires: there are still other possibilities, and even if they are as remote as swans disembarking from a space ship, they are still sufficient to undermine strong foundationalism. Wolterstorff provides another example of the problem; he notes the case of seeing a brown desk: 'may it not be that some noxious chemical of which I know nothing has entered my city's water supply, making this object *look* brown when it is *not* brown?' (51, emphasis in original). Even if you were aware of all the *possible* factors that could alter perception, how could you know with certainty you were not being affected by one of them? 'In short, if I am to come to the indubitable knowledge that my perceptual capacities are in their normal state by the use of my perceptual capacities, I must already have indubitable knowledge that my perceptual capacities are in their normal state' (52). This however is a hopelessly circular prospect, one which draws support for its premises from what must be proven. Consequently, the only certain claim you can make which would satisfy the demands of strong foundationalism is a more qualified statement that it *appears* to you that your perceptual capacities are working correctly, and

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<sup>18</sup> Some people clearly cannot know this by observation (e.g. the blind) while all people cannot know it under certain conditions (e.g. I am standing in a darkened room). I am leaving these possibilities aside.

thus that you *seem to see* green hair or a brown desk. Notice how humble this certain claim is: it is limited to your subjective, internal conscious experience, and says nothing about the real (objective) world. But true science – *and existentially significant knowledge* – transcends such subjective experiences of consciousness to gain objective facts about the world. Hence, the value of this chastened certainty is negligible at best.

Wolterstorff concludes that the prospects for uncovering a certain basis on which to build all knowledge is no longer tenable: we must 'give it up for mortally ill and learn to live in its absence' (56). Wolterstorff is emphatic that this does not entail (as the postmodernists seem to think) that we can know nothing, that there is no objective truth. It is wrong to give up on the search for truth, and to simply wallow in a relativism and anti-realism. Wolterstorff suggests rather, that we consider descriptive theories which, instead of *prescribing* how knowledge ought to be attained, limit their focus to *describing* how it is actually obtained. If we consider the actual doxastic (belief-forming) practices of individuals we can see that strong foundationalism simply does not ring true. Wolterstorff considers the case of the scientist. Strong foundationalism would have us believe the scientist is a paragon of intellectual virtue: one who coolly assesses all the evidence and through certain means of deduction and induction, formulates and validates hypotheses. In fact, while there is often more than one theory that may account for the data, scientists regularly commit to a particular theory prior to any investigation, and carry out their enquiry within the confines of the theory. There is thus no detached objectivity; indeed, the scientist 'remains cloaked in belief.' (66) Hence, in order to critically analyse and assimilate data, we all *need* prior commitments. Two types of these commitments are data-background beliefs and control beliefs. The data-background beliefs are those which are assumed when one engages in a theory. If you believe you are seeing my hair as green, you are employing antecedent beliefs about what 'green' and 'hair' are, as well as many other background beliefs which remain unproved.<sup>19</sup> Control beliefs do not relate to the

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<sup>19</sup> You need not however have a specific term like 'green' and 'hair' in mind to know in some sense what these things are.



theory itself, but rather determine in advance what kind of theory a person can accept. *These beliefs lead us to reject and devise theories within their perimeters.*

Wolterstorff then draws an important comparison, arguing that the Christian, like the scientist, should be allowed to openly formulate and evaluate theories while allowing his fundamental commitments (e.g. the lordship of Christ, authority of the Bible) to serve as control beliefs. Control beliefs are generally not specific enough to entail particular theories, and so this allows Christians much creative room by which to develop differing modes of enquiry in encountering and assessing data. This does not mean that the Christian only recognises specifically Christian commitments as control beliefs, for each person has a wide range of control beliefs inextricably bound with their cultural context, education, and a variety of other factors.<sup>20</sup> For instance, one widely shared control belief is that events are not self-caused (e.g. an explosion does not create itself). There is thus a wide diversity regarding some control beliefs (as well as wide commonality among others) and no reason why the deliverances of Christian faith cannot be included among them. One may object however, that such an account entails that one may hold one's beliefs no matter what the counter-evidence. Indeed, does this view not place us too close to the postmodernist who reduces all truth claims to subjective assertions? However, Wolterstorff is subtler than that. It is obvious that such conflicts can occur and when they do a decision between beliefs needs to be made. Consider the famous dispute between the Catholic Church and Galileo; at the time the Catholic Church was guided by a rigid interpretation of certain passages in the Bible which led it to espouse the theory that the earth is the fixed centre of the universe around which the sun revolves (geocentrism). This however conflicted with Galileo's theory that the earth moved around the sun (heliocentrism). The church authorities had to choose between the science presented by Galileo and their interpretation of Christian faith, and as is well known, they chose to reject Galileo's theory and maintain their control belief. But you would be hard

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<sup>20</sup> For instance, a Christian female Canadian physicist will have some different control beliefs from a Christian male Bengali fisherman.

pressed today to find a Christian who still affirms geocentrism, much less one who believes it is a central tenet of the faith! The point is that our control beliefs, including ones related to Christian faith, can be challenged and occasionally must be abandoned. Clearly then, it is false to simply say that Christian (or other religious) belief is 'pre-theoretical' and so is in principle indemnified against any counter-evidence.

### *Evaluation*

Wolterstorff's critique aptly demonstrates that the kind of certainty strong foundationalism requires is simply not attainable for humans apart from our subjective states.<sup>21</sup> To make contact with the world, we must accept that we *could* be wrong in our beliefs. Wolterstorff's further point is well taken: Christians should be unapologetic about allowing their particular control beliefs to guide their theorising and shape viable research projects in an active search for truth. Unfortunately there is an important ambiguity underlying Wolterstorff's work. Where we have spoken of strong foundationalism Wolterstorff speaks simply of foundationalism. In other words, he appears to equate the general foundationalist thesis with what we have called strong foundationalism. Despite this ambiguity, it appears that Wolterstorff's position is best defined as *moderate* foundationalism. This is evident in his view that control beliefs *can* be challenged. However, this ambiguity leaves an important question unanswered: what are the *limits* of control beliefs? As Hugo Meynell states: 'I am troubled by the fact that, as it seems to me, no belief is so cognitively bizarre or morally frightful that it could not be defended on the basis of the kind of account Wolterstorff advances'.<sup>22</sup> This indeed appears true. A Heaven's Gate member *could* argue that he is simply being guided by *his* control

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<sup>21</sup> As it stands, this is not strictly true however. Wolterstorff would also allow that we can know some certain truths not related to our subjective states like 'There are no square circles' and  $1 + 1 = 2$ . But these are not what we might call existentially significant truths, and thus are woefully inadequate as fundamental axioms on which to build a noetic structure.

<sup>22</sup> Hugo Meynell, 'Faith, Foundationalism, and Nicholas Wolterstorff', in *Rational Faith*. Linda Zagzebski, ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1993), 80.

beliefs. To be fair to Wolterstorff, as we have seen, he stresses that control beliefs can come into conflict, such that a Heaven's Gate member could be challenged to surrender his control beliefs in celestial resurrection. Nonetheless, there is something repugnant about extending even *prima facie* rationality to such bizarre beliefs. Cannot more be said?

## William Alston

In his important book *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, William Alston takes a very different approach from that of Wolterstorff as he operates more explicitly within a moderately foundationalist framework. Alston focuses on forwarding a critique of the categorical exclusion of religious belief from the category of knowledge by arguing that perception of God, or as he says, 'mystical perception' can offer grounds for belief in God. To argue this thesis he develops a crucial analogy between perception of God and sense perception.

Alston first concerns himself with attacking a pervasive prejudice within académie that assumes mystical experiences are simply subjective states of consciousness such as delusions or hallucinations. Alston argues that there is no reason not to consider them as perceptual experiences of God (a move which would allow them into the foundations with other general perceptual beliefs). Alston begins by surveying various psychological reports detailing experiences of God to adjudge whether they can indeed be credibly interpreted as offering evidence for a transcendent experience.<sup>23</sup> We can note here one example:

the Holy Spirit descended upon me in a manner that seemed to go through me, body and soul. I could feel the impression, like a wave of electricity, going through and through me. Indeed, it seemed to come in waves and waves of liquid love; for I could not express it in any other way.  
(Anonymous report in James 1902, p. 250) (14)

Clearly not all such experiences are as overwhelming as the above example; many divine perceptions may reside in the background of our experience like other perceptual experiences.

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<sup>23</sup> Alston focuses his study on nonsensory experiences which involve a direct, mediated awareness of God. Alston recognises that many people may experience God indirectly – such as through gazing upon the beauty of a sunset (as we will see, Alvin Plantinga makes much of this approach) – but he limits his study to direct perception.

There are immediate problems with viewing these types of experiences as instances of *perception* of God. For instance, Alston notes: 'How can something present itself to one's experience as good or powerful, or as strengthening or forgiving one, in the same sense as that in which it can be experienced as red, round, acrid, or bitter?' (44) In other words, qualifiers like 'good' and 'powerful' do not seem to apply to experience in an analogous sense to more familiar *qualia* like colour, shape and taste.<sup>24</sup> What does it mean to *perceive* God as powerful? Another apparent problem is that we cannot outline the basic qualities of this experience. While we understand the basic elements and function of the other modes of perception, so called perception of God is not understood at all. Alston however, does not see this as a serious problem, for it could simply be God's purpose and intention to have us perceive in this way. It may be that we simply are appeared to and then utilise comparative concepts to describe the experience.<sup>25</sup> Alston concludes that there are no reasons to *a priori* dismiss all perceptions of God as simply subjective states of consciousness.

Alston turns next to an extended analysis of the grounds for sense perception, with the intention of drawing sense perception as an analogue alongside mystical perception. Alston focuses on the following question: on what basis, grounds or evidence do we trust the deliverances of our senses? His involved discussion reaches the conclusion that there is no argument for sensory perception that is both viable on its own merits and non-circular. What this means is that every successful argument for the reliability of sense perception which is otherwise valid at some point utilises the deliverances of sense perception in order to establish its premises.<sup>26</sup> A most crude example of this basic approach would be to argue that

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<sup>24</sup> Qualia are the properties of things that we perceive.

<sup>25</sup> Alston notes that there are some mystical experiences which appear to transcend this comparative solution – such as Teresa of Avila's alleged perception of the Trinity – but Alston does not interact with these complex cases (48).

<sup>26</sup> Alston outlines three examples of sources of belief that draw upon sense perception: (1) reasoning from observed facts; (2) instruments; (3) the implications of high level theories (107).

'Sense perception is trustworthy because it hasn't failed me yet'. The person who argues in this way is drawing upon the past results of sense perception to demonstrate that it is in fact trustworthy. But this type of reasoning is obviously circular insofar as it draws on the deliverances of sense perception to establish the premises that sense perception has been reliable in the past. Now the arguments Alston critiques are much more sophisticated than this little ditty, but none of them ultimately escapes this morass of circularity. The inevitable fact is that there is no way of stepping wholly *outside* of our sense perception to demonstrate that it is in fact reliable.<sup>27</sup>

Alston's next step is to consider whether the reliability of mystical perception (MP) could be argued for in a non-circular way. Here he considers two possible means to establish mystical perception on non-circular grounds. The first possibility is natural theology, the use of philosophical argumentation to reason to the existence of God.<sup>28</sup> The prospects of natural theology are not very bright. Even if such arguments are successful in establishing the existence of God (and as I noted earlier, since Hume and Kant, most philosophers would argue that they are not), they still provide no reason to believe that *my* mystical perception of God is in fact reliable. (To draw another example, consider that you are concerned about the reliability of a Fiat you want to buy. Always eager to help, I inform you that Fiat rates high on customer satisfaction surveys. While generally helpful, that fact still tells you nothing about whether the Fiat *you* want to buy is reliable.) The other possibility is revelation, that is, God's revealing himself in a special way in the world. While Alston is open to this possibility, he concludes that in order to receive revelation we must first assume that our mystical perception is in fact reliable. For this reason, revelation cannot then be used to establish the reliability of MP: in attempting to do so, we again face the problem of circularity.

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<sup>27</sup> Here we may note the parallel with Wolterstorff who would probably view our assumption that sense perception is trustworthy as a 'control belief'.

<sup>28</sup> The traditional arguments of natural theology are the cosmological, teleological and ontological and moral arguments for the existence of God.

So it appears that MP is in a similar epistemic circle to sense perception (SP): are these circles vicious? That is, do they impugn MP and SP as being irrational? Alston thinks not. He argues that we can still demonstrate the reliability of SP on the ground that it is a firmly established doxastic (belief forming) practice.<sup>29</sup> In other words, it is a practice of forming beliefs which is deeply entrenched in our social communities. Though we may not have non-circular arguments in support of the practice of SP, apart from good reasons to question it, we are wholly justified to continue forming beliefs in this way.<sup>30</sup> Alston refers to a socially established doxastic practice which allots a *prima facie* justification as manifesting 'practical rationality'. Alston wants to apply this same principle of practical rationality based on the doxastic practices of social communities to MP. But immediately red flags go up. One obvious difference between SP and MP is that the former is universally practised (everybody is constantly engaged in sense perception) while relatively few people experience mystical perception (just ask Richard Dawkins when was the last time God spoke to him!). But Alston does not see this as creating an intractable problem. He explains that the disparity might have something to do with a special sensory ability possessed by a few: 'We are familiar with many areas in which only a small percentage of the population has developed the perceptual sensitivity to certain features of the world, – for example, the distinctive qualities of wines and the inner voices of a complex orchestral performance' (169). It is important that MP, like SP, is practically rational insofar as it is practised as a socially established act. Alston argues that this requirement bars us having to accept bizarre and idiosyncratic practices as *prima facie* justified. Here Alston draws the colourful picture of Cedric, who predicts developments on the stock market by studying sun-dried

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<sup>29</sup> Alston writes: 'I think of a doxastic practice as the exercise of a system or constellation of belief-forming habits or mechanisms, each realising a function that yields beliefs with a certain kind of content from inputs of a certain type' (155).

<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that forming beliefs by SP is all but inescapable; it involves involuntary psychological practices. Thus, even if SP was rejected as unreliable, it does not seem likely that people could cease forming beliefs by SP.

tomatoes; this is exactly the type of doxastic practice we want to avoid!

If a firmly established doxastic practice produces an output of beliefs which is not demonstrated to be sufficiently unreliable by other doxastic practices, then the practice may be rationally engaged in. So if it is rational to engage in SP then it is rational to view it as a reliable doxastic practice. The similarities between MP and SP are important to extend this *prima facie* justification. Both are generally acquired early in one's life, before reflection on them is possible. Admittedly there are a number of types of MP, but there is at least some variation in SP practices. They both also have overrider systems which, as with Wolterstorff's control beliefs, limit the beliefs which can be accommodated, overriding those which conflict with the limits. Consider SP: if I believe I suddenly see a red dragon on the sidewalk, this is sufficiently out of the norm to warrant the consideration that I may be hallucinating, unless further information is received (e.g. I remember that it is Chinese New Year).

Alston then focuses on Christian mystical practice (CMP), arguing that it can be considered a socially established doxastic practice which is not demonstrably unreliable.<sup>31</sup> But does CMP have a sufficient overrider system? Indeed it does. For illustration, Alston notes the case of Jim Jones, a cult leader whose whole following committed mass suicide at his command (the Heaven's Gate case is another example). Alston notes that a Christian could judge from within his doxastic practice that such a request of suicide would conflict with his beliefs and reject the command on those grounds (190). Alston's point is that Christian beliefs have built-in limitations to the range of further beliefs and practices they can accommodate; moreover, such obviously destructive doxastic practices as that of Jonestown and Heaven's Gate simply do not endure long enough to perpetuate themselves to the point where they would truly become socially established.

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<sup>31</sup> Here Alston distinguishes himself from Plantinga who we will discuss next (195–97). He believes that CMP offers a better ground for perception than Plantinga's basicity model, and has greater intuitive plausibility.



Alston considers a number of objections to his proposal. To begin with, let us grant that the overrider system in CMP (that which inhibits the formation of certain beliefs) would override the most destructive beliefs; can we conclude that it is sufficient to prevent all aberrant beliefs? The problem is that it appears to admit all manner of experiences, which while not harmful in the sense of Heaven's Gate, would still be strange and unjustified (remember the leprechaun pundit?). How can the practitioner of CMP find an external check for his beliefs? How can one ever test one's religious beliefs to confirm them? Further, what of predictive accuracy in CMP? It seems that CMP is utterly lacking in the necessary overrides to make it a respectable analogue to SP. Moreover, could there not be a naturalistic explanation for CMP (e.g. Freudian wish-fulfilment)? What about conflict with other seemingly more reliable systems, such as when CMP and science disagree? What is more, people who have religious experiences typically receive the types of beliefs they expect: the Polish Catholic sees an apparition of the Madonna while the Pentecostal speaks in tongues; indeed, Jews, Mormons, and Buddhists all experience mystical perceptions corresponding to their antecedent beliefs. This suggests that the experiences arise from the individual and his personal expectations instead of from some transcendent deity.

After that barrage of objections, one might think the game is up, and that CMP has surely failed to be a fitting analogue to SP. However, Alston is not easily defeated. To begin with, he notes that *both* SP and CMP involve concepts which are possessed antecedent to perception, and that in neither case is there a reason to adjudge either as delimiting or determining what is perceived. Alston's overall response to the criticisms however can be summed up in the claim that they turn on two fallacies: epistemic imperialism, and the double standard fallacy. The former arbitrarily assumes that one type of doxastic practice – CMP – must conform in particularities to another type of doxastic practice – SP. The latter criticism arbitrarily demands that CMP meet a higher standard for rationality than SP or other doxastic practices can meet.

Consider the demand that for CMP to be valid it should be open to testing and verification or prediction. There is no reason to accept this arbitrary demand, and indeed there are good *theological* reasons

to reject it. If God is sovereign and transcendent it would be presumptuous (to say the least!) to assume that experience of him can only proceed in some predictable and publicly testable way.<sup>32</sup> Further, if this requirement for rationality were to be applied to other doxastic practices (e.g. introspection) they too would be counted irrational. Moreover, these criticisms overlook the significant tests *within* Christian practice to evaluate beliefs: the fact is that those who undergo CMP often carefully engage in a self-critical assessment to discern the origin of particular experiences. In this way, CMP can find significant self-support in a similar way to SP. SP supports itself as over time it yields what seem to be consistent, true perceptual beliefs. Similarly, CMP gains support as over time the Christian practitioner is sanctified in the Holy Spirit and increasingly manifests virtues such as holiness, love, and self-control. Teresa of Avila makes this point to her critics in defence of her visions:

I could show them these jewels, for everyone who knew me saw clearly that my soul had changed ... I could not believe, therefore, that if the devil were doing this in order to deceive me and drag me down to hell, he would adopt means so contrary to his purpose as to take away my vices and give me virtues and strength instead. (quoted in 202).

Such a personal transformation of character would thus support the *prima facie* justification of CMP.

What of the possibility of a naturalistic origin for CMP, such as Freudian wish-fulfilment? Would such an explanation not be simpler and so more preferable? Alston responds first that such 'arguments' are based on remarkably slim evidence and that even if it could be demonstrated that Christianity arises through, say, wish-fulfilment, that would still not entail that Christianity was *false*: perhaps God chooses to reveal himself through human wishes. What of the challenges science presents to CMP? Alston is unfazed: 'that again could be but an isolated bit of turbulence in a generally

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<sup>32</sup> This puts the recent double blind tests which were carried out at medical colleges on the efficacy of prayer on patients in a rather dim light!

calm sea'. (239) That is, while a conflict between Christianity and science or history could theoretically arise (as we saw with the geocentric theory), Alston can see none looming on the horizon, certainly not one that would be sufficient to merit the loss of practical rationality in CMP. And there is little reason to consider such a challenge in a materialistic metaphysic which rules out divine interaction *a priori*.

But does not CMP generate inconsistencies sufficient to override its *prima facie* justification? Alston admits that there is some inconsistency in the results of CMP, but, he avers, the same is true of other justified doxastic practices, including SP: those who demand that any doxastic practice must *always* be wholly consistent set an unobtainable goal. Alston admits that the inconsistencies arising from CMP seem to be higher than for SP, but he sees no reason to suppose they are sufficient to demonstrate the manifest unreliability of CMP so as to override its *prima facie* justification. But is Alston correct here? Consider the problem of religious pluralism.<sup>33</sup> Different religious beliefs conflict radically in their understanding of what it is to perceive God. Some religions are monotheistic, some are pantheistic, and some are polytheistic. Such radically contradictory results would suggest that mystical practice is not a reliable source of belief. To illustrate the problem, consider that you are at a carnival. There are a number of coin-operated machines lined up on the fairway, each wearing the title 'The Incredible Truth-Telling Machine'. Each promises on a little sign that if you ask any question, you will get the correct answer. So you plug in your change to one and type in a question, asking what is the current population of India (a matter which is of pressing concern for you at the moment). The machine spits out a printed response that reads '195,000 people'. You are puzzled at the response and so you try the next machine with the same question. It

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<sup>33</sup> One response to this problem, which is increasingly popular today, is to claim that the major religions in fact generate largely harmonious beliefs – that they do not differ in the essentials. Alston rejects this response: it is simply not credible to argue that, for instance, Christianity, Hinduism and Jainism do not differ at a most fundamental level. For instance, Christian mystical practice yields an experience of God as personal and loving while a Hindu's mystical perception may yield an experience of God as impersonal and indeed identical to the world (pantheism).

prints out '950,000,000 people'. Rightly sceptical, you try the third machine down and it responds '154.3 people'. By this time you are out of change and you appropriately conclude these are really 'Incredible money-making machines' with little reliability as regards to the truth. The same basic conclusion would seem to apply to the various modes of MP which yield such radically different answers to the same questions. Granted one form of MP could be reliable just as one of the 'truth-telling' machines might have yielded the correct answer. However, without some extraneous way to judge which religion or machine is reliable, you would be advised to trust none of them.

Alston is unimpressed with this type of criticism: true we would expect a general consistency in SP, but why assume that such unanimity must be reached in all areas of human cognition? There could be many factors that would greatly reduce the unanimity, such as if the subject matter is particularly difficult. Granted there is no common method to adjudicate conflicting claims but we must remember that this condition is not limited to MP; if SP shows itself to be reliable only from *within* the practice, why should CMP be any different?

Nonetheless, Alston admits that religious plurality does present a formidable problem. Assuming that at least one religious practice is true, only one practice can be reliable; what reasons may one have for supposing CMP is that reliable practice apart from reasons internal to it, especially when similar reasons can be produced from within the competing systems which all appear consistent within themselves and are equally well-established as socially doxastic practices? Alston suggests that one could still defend Christianity over against other practices on external grounds (e.g. natural theology) but even so, there is another possible response to the problem. Consider an analogy: what if there were more than one mode of SP? Would you not be justified in continuing in your mode of SP which you have mastered and which yields dependable results for you? Obviously you would not be obliged to give up SP altogether. Alston reasons the same applies for CMP and other religious practices that enjoy the status of being socially established, internally and externally coherent, doxastic practices.

But it is not simply that we depend on a socially established doxastic practice. As Alston reminds us, CMP provides significant internal support through the experience of sanctification and the 'fruits of the Spirit' manifested in the Christian's life. This is a point we have seen made above in the life of Teresa of Avila. Further, as Alston notes, it is important to maintain a historical perspective on religious plurality:

the degree of unanimity in a given area of thought can change radically in the course of history. And so it may be in religion. We may be in as early a stage of religious development as physicists were in the high Middle Ages.  
(278)

Thus, the Christian is *prima facie* justified in continuing in his (self-supporting) belief even in light of other contrary beliefs, with the understanding that greater harmony in doxastic practices might be reached in the future.

When considering the scope of CMP within the panoply of revelation, natural theology, and tradition, Alston notes: 'I do not suppose that any is sufficient by itself to render religious belief rationally acceptable, but I take it that each can carry part of the load'. (286) In short, he believes these further sources can provide a strong (moderately foundationalist) basis for belief, and when these sources appear uncertain, the Christian 'can fall back on her immediate, intimate sense of the presence and activity of God in her life ...' (306) The fact is that no system of belief stands alone as an indubitable and incorrigible rock of certainty (and here Alston's parting of ways with the strong foundationalist tradition is certainly clear). But taking account of the Christian's legitimate doxastic experience of God provides good grounds for her practical rationality in engaging in CMP.

### *Evaluation*

Alston appears to espouse a moderate foundationalist approach, though like Wolterstorff he does not employ this term. But it is clear that Alston has abandoned the requirement for certainty and the dream of an Archimedean point of objective and universal rationality. At the same time, he appears to have offered a more

careful rendering than Wolterstorff of what types of beliefs are acceptable, namely, those which can become socially established practices. Alston is at his best when challenging the hegemony of SP and the prejudicial way that mystical experience is rejected as a reliable ground for believing in God; as such, he has done much to address this prejudice.

Nonetheless, his work leaves some important questions unanswered. We can focus specifically on the role 'practical rationality' plays for Alston. Why think only socially established practices are more likely to be reliable? Why cannot idiosyncratic practices be reliable? Plantinga suggests a case where a person comes to hold views that disagree with the majority of people: I unwisely read Nietzsche, becoming convinced that the common herd is commonly wrong; I develop a lordly Nietzschean disdain for the ways in which the generality of humankind form their belief. Then presumably the rational thing would be to choose practices that are *not* socially established.<sup>34</sup>

Is there something arbitrary about advocating a socially established doxastic practice as a criterion for rationality? To see the difficulty, consider as an example the case of the early Christian Church. Christianity began as a novel sect within Judaism which insisted on teachings like the incarnation that both Jews and Romans dismissed as bizarre and offensive. At what point then did Christianity become socially established, and are we to conclude that until that point the early Christians were practically irrational? These ambiguities also reflect on our assessment of Heaven's Gate. What if the members had not espoused mass suicide but instead argued that every member must commit suicide at the age of fifty. Consider further that over a few centuries most people in North America eventually became members of the cult. Would they then be practically rational?

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<sup>34</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 123.

## Alvin Plantinga

In 1979–80 the Center for Christian Studies at Calvin College in Michigan undertook a project entitled 'A Reformed View of Faith and Reason'. A compendium of the key essays developed in that project was published in 1983 as *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*. This book, which has become the *locus classicus* of Reformed epistemology, includes important essays by both Nicholas Wolterstorff and William Alston.<sup>35</sup> However, we will focus on Alvin Plantinga's seminal essay 'Reason and Belief in God'<sup>36</sup> before turning to Plantinga's most recent work.

Plantinga's question cuts right to the heart of the debate: why do we need evidence to be rationally justified to believe in God? This requirement has often been presented as a duty, one which Plantinga identifies as deriving from strong foundationalism and evidentialism.<sup>37</sup> In other words, we as good citizens should refrain from believing in God until sufficient evidence is presented to us for his existence. We noted earlier that strong foundationalism receives its definitive modern formulation from John Locke, but Plantinga argues that it is a tradition traceable to Thomas Aquinas and even back to Aristotle. Ancient and medieval foundationalism (that of Aristotle and Aquinas) accepted two types of belief as properly basic: those which are self-evident (e.g.  $1 + 2 = 3$ ) or evident to the

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<sup>35</sup> *Faith and Rationality*, Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983). See Wolterstorff, 'Can Belief in God Be Rational If It Has No Foundations?' and Alston, 'Christian Experience and Christian Belief'.

<sup>36</sup> Plantinga began to re-evaluate his earlier assumptions regarding foundationalism in 1979, in an essay entitled 'Is Belief in God Rational?' in *Rationality and Religious Belief*, C.F. Delaney, ed. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979. Two other influential early articles were 'The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology', in *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, 54, 1980; 'Is Belief in God Properly Basic?' in *Nous*, 15: 41–51.

<sup>37</sup> As I said above, I will continue to maintain consistency by employing the terms simple, moderate and strong foundationalism. However, Plantinga employs the term 'classical foundationalism' instead of 'strong foundationalism' and does not employ my first two terms.

senses (e.g. I see a bent stick in the water).<sup>38</sup> Locke is of the modern philosophical tradition which follows Descartes' (1596–1650) in building certainty on a method of doubt. In other words, we begin by critically appraising our beliefs, seeing which could be false and which could not, and building our knowledge on the latter. So we assess a belief like a visual appearance: 'I see a bent stick in the water'. To be certain however, this proposition must be emended to: '*I seem to see* a bent stick in the water'.<sup>39</sup> This emendation is necessary because I could be wrong about seeing the bent stick. For instance, it might be a straight stick which only appears bent because of distortion in the water (remember my green hair?).<sup>40</sup> Since the former assertion is corrigible, (it could be proved wrong) strong foundationalism is limited to accepting the second, more chastened formulation. While the stick might not be bent, it is indeed certain that it *seems* bent to me.<sup>41</sup> Hence this perception is incorrigible (a belief which cannot be proved false) and is admitted into the foundations by modern (strong) foundationalists along with self-evident beliefs.

Plantinga accepts that these types of beliefs are properly foundational, but he questions why *only* these beliefs should be considered so.<sup>42</sup> He offers two arguments against strong foundationalism's limited criteria for properly basic beliefs. First, Plantinga points out that according to strong foundationalism, many (if not most) of the beliefs which we hold are unjustified and irrational; that is, they are not self-evident, evident to the senses or

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<sup>38</sup> Of course neither Aristotle nor Aquinas used the terms 'basic' and 'non-basic'. These are Plantinga's.

<sup>39</sup> We discussed this practice of qualifying statements earlier with Wolterstorff.

<sup>40</sup> This is by no means simply a modern observation however. Augustine (354–430) countered the ancient Greek sceptics in *Against the Academicians* along similar lines.

<sup>41</sup> Wolterstorff made this point earlier. I could think the desk is brown when it really is not, due to some hallucinatory chemical.

<sup>42</sup> For the sake of discussion then, Plantinga includes beliefs which are evident to the senses (I see a bent stick in the water) that the ancient and medieval foundationalist would have accepted, as well as the modern, sceptical equivalent (I seem to see a bent stick in the water).



incorrigible, nor do they derive from beliefs that are. Consider memory beliefs. Do you remember what you had for breakfast? Perhaps you recall that you had a waffle smothered in chocolate sauce and sprinkled with cheese. One would think that this belief would be *prima facie* justified just by virtue of you remembering in this way. But by the strong foundationalist view you would in fact be strictly required to provide evidence for that belief in order for it to be justified. Now if you are not a particularly dutiful dishwasher, you may be able to go home and find a plate in your sink with chocolate sauce on it, and that may be sufficient evidence to justify your memory belief. Perhaps you also find some flecks of cheese on your collar. Now you have *very* good evidence for that belief! But what about your memories of dinner last Thursday, or of last Christmas, or of your childhood? Again, it is easy to see that if memory beliefs require this kind of evidence, the vast majority will not be justified, and we are consequently irrational to accept them.

The same is true for other beliefs which we generally accept as basic. Consider beliefs you accept on testimony. How can I be justified in believing that the population of India is 950,000,000 people or that William the Conqueror invaded England in 1066? These beliefs are not self-evident, or evident to the senses or incorrigible. If I accept them, I do so not by deriving them from certain foundations but from *testimony*, in this case, the testimony of my encyclopaedia which in turn has gathered these facts from numerous sources deemed trustworthy. Consider a third example: the belief in other minds. How do you know that all the people around you are not very advanced robots, and that you are not the only person in the world?<sup>43</sup> Again, our belief in other minds fulfils none of the strong foundationalist criteria, and there is no way to trace it to these foundations. We cannot know that other people exist in this narrowly restricted way. And so, upon reflection it seems clear that if we accept strong foundationalism then the vast majority of our beliefs are in fact irrational and unjustified. However, this seems unacceptable: we are obviously rational and

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<sup>43</sup> This would be a version of a position called solipsism.

justified in believing these things, and so it seems the strong foundationalist criterion should be rejected.

Plantinga's second criticism is equally devastating. In short, he argues that strong foundationalism erects a criterion of rationality that it cannot itself meet, for it demands that a belief is rational only if it is self-evident, evident to the senses or incorrigible, or if it is traceable to such foundational beliefs. Let us call this the 'foundationalist criterion'. Now presumably this criterion is itself held as a belief which must measure up to its own standard. But the foundationalist criterion is *not* self-evident (Plantinga for one denies it), evident to the senses, or incorrigible. Since there seems no way to derive it from beliefs that are self-evident, evident to the senses or incorrigible, Plantinga concludes that by its own criterion, strong foundationalism is an unjustified, irrational belief. Plantinga labels this problem 'self-referential incoherence'.

To illustrate the self-referential problem that the strong foundationalist faces, consider the following dilemma. A Cretan comes up to you and says, 'Cretans always lie'. Should you accept what he says? If you believe him, then you accept that his statement is *true*. But that creates a dilemma, for to accept the truth of the statement defeats the statement: if you accept the statement that means you believe him, but if you believe him you cannot accept the statement. This perplexity is similar to that faced by the person espousing the strong foundationalist criterion. To accept this criterion that beliefs are *only* rational if they are self-evident, incorrigible, evident to the senses, or traceable to beliefs that are, he must cease holding the criterion itself – hardly a promising prospect! The only conclusion seems to be that the strong foundationalist criterion itself must be rejected and with that rejection the way is open to considering belief in God as a basic belief which does not need evidence.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> It is quite obvious that the strong foundationalist criteria of rationality are not properly basic, but could they not be traceable to the foundations? This is in principle possible, but without any demonstration of how this might occur (and none has yet been presented) the position remains incoherent.

Strong foundationalism as Plantinga conceives it is thus irredeemably flawed. At the same time, it seems clear that a 'postmodern' response that denies any absolute truth and allows everybody to believe virtually anything they want is not acceptable. I may not have as sure an account as Clifford of what the 'ethics of belief' are, but I am quite certain that the Heaven's Gate cult violated them. But what about belief in God? Can such a belief be properly held without evidence? If so, then how? It is an obvious fact that we gain beliefs as we perceive the world through our five senses. Might we have a further sense that provides beliefs for us about God and is *prima facie* justified in a similar way? Plantinga believes so, and to develop this idea he consults his own Reformed theological tradition. John Calvin taught that all people are made to form beliefs about God in a natural, immediate and basic way. Calvin calls this tendency the *sensus divinitatis* (SD) or 'sense of the divine'. Originally the *sensus divinitatis* functioned properly, but since the fall of Adam and Eve it has been suppressed and distorted by human sin. As Plantinga puts it: 'Were it not for the existence of sin in the world, human beings would believe in God to the same degree and with the same natural spontaneity that we believe in the existence of other persons, an external world, or the past.' (66). Just as blindness inhibits our sight, and deafness inhibits our audition, so sin has inhibited the *sensus divinitatis*: because of sin we are (largely) blind and deaf towards God.<sup>45</sup> How does the SD work? It could include the cases of CMP that Alston considers, but Plantinga broadens his considerations to include beliefs about God which arise from even the most mundane experiences including seeing the starry sky or the beauty of a flower: when the SD produces beliefs about God in these circumstances, the person is epistemically justified in a basic sense as with sense perception, testimony and other basic sources of belief. Hence, I can stand on the beach holding hands with my wife, watching the sunset. As we watch the sun, the thought can come to me that God created the world. Just as I am justified in believing that I am holding hands with my wife

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<sup>45</sup> Another way to look at it is that I naturally form beliefs about the external world (e.g. that it exists) unless, say, I have a cognitive disorder arising from a brain tumour which causes me to think the external world does not exist.

rather than hallucinating, so I am basically justified in accepting that God created the world.

Plantinga's account of how people might attain justified belief in God immediately raises a difficult question which Plantinga himself notes: why cannot any other belief be admitted as basic as well, including, for instance, a belief in the Great Pumpkin? (In the *Peanuts* cartoon Linus waits every Halloween for the Great Pumpkin to appear and distribute gifts to the faithful Great Pumpkinites worldwide). And what about Alston's friend Cedric who predicts the stock market with his sun-dried tomatoes? On a more serious note, what of the Heaven's Gate cult? Given Plantinga's account is there really such a difference? Might not their delusions of grandeur have been accepted by them as in some sense basic? It seems there may be little to prevent this kind of 'free for all justification' from devolving into the kind of chaos that so horrified John Locke.

Plantinga freely admits that he has no criterion for admitting certain beliefs into the foundations (e.g. belief in God) and excluding others (belief in the Great Pumpkin or Heaven's Gate). He does not have privy access to a binding ethics of belief. However, he claims this is not a serious problem: we simply need to adopt an inductive approach to discerning what beliefs truly are properly basic. Criteria for basicity 'should not be presented *ex cathedra* but argued to and tested by a relevant set of examples' (77, emphasis in original). As I said above, we may not know exactly how a belief is basic, but we do know that certain beliefs are properly accepted as basic and others are not. I *know* my memory beliefs are basic while the Heaven's Gate cultist's belief in his pending celestial resurrection is not. Plantinga is suggesting that we begin here by noting beliefs which are obviously not basic. There is clearly no cognitive faculty like the *sensus divinitatis* producing beliefs about the Great Pumpkin (or a celestial resurrection through suicide).

It needs to be stressed however that Plantinga is not arguing that the SD provides *evidence* for belief in God, since he has argued such belief needs no such *evidence* to be justified. However, such beliefs do need appropriate *grounds* which provide the right circumstances for a belief to be brought about. Hence, for Plantinga properly basic

theistic belief does have proper grounds and so is not groundless. Consider this analogy to capture the difference: I see your mother baking cookies and form the belief that your mother is baking cookies (and the added belief that I had better be kind to her if I hope to taste her cookies). My perception of her baking cookies is not *evidence* for the conclusion that she is in fact baking cookies, but rather the occasion or grounds for my holding that belief. The same holds for other basic beliefs such as memory and belief in other minds. As with seeing a tree, there are many conditions that 'call forth' or occasion belief in God.<sup>46</sup> Just like these other properly basic beliefs which are grounded simply in their experience, so belief in God is grounded in the experience of God. Belief in the Great Pumpkin or Heaven's Gate has no comparable grounds. These really are groundless beliefs, without the proper occasion to justify them. So when we compare such unconventional beliefs with beliefs that clearly are properly basic, including the criteria of strong foundationalism and the other sources of belief we have considered – memory, testimony, belief in other minds and in God – it is clear that the unconventional beliefs are not basic.<sup>47</sup>

Plantinga admits that many people (e.g. Bertrand Russell, Richard Dawkins) will disagree with his admitting belief in God into the foundations as a properly basic belief (just as many like Heaven's Gate cultists may disagree with his excluding their beliefs), but as we have seen from the critique of strong foundationalism, such objectors have no real basis for these objections; and why should the Christian community care what Russell (or Dawkins) think on this matter? Who made the atheist or sceptic the guard to the gates of rationality? Still, has Plantinga not opened himself up to the same charge that Wolterstorff faced? Does not accepting belief in God as basic mean it can be accepted no matter what the contrary evidence? *No*. Plantinga is emphatic that believing without reasons

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<sup>46</sup> Among these beliefs – God loves me; God speaks to me; God forgives me – is not the belief that God exists; this belief arises out of these basic experiences, but is not itself basic. (Of course, it could be if a person in seeing the sunset simply arrived at the belief that God exists.)

<sup>47</sup> Alston's point on an established doxastic community could also be an added consideration here.

does not entail nor justify believing irrespective of powerful counter-evidence. In other words, properly basic beliefs can be overturned on further evidence. Consider my basic memory belief that I had a waffle with chocolate sauce and cheese for breakfast. That belief can be overturned if my wife tells me I actually had a New York steak and fries and I then remember that the waffle experience was just a dream. Plantinga holds that the same is true for theistic belief: it too can lose its basic status on further evidence. Thus, Plantinga agrees with Alston (and, it appears, Wolterstorff) that the justification conferred on Christian belief is *prima facie* rather than absolute.<sup>48</sup>

The essay 'Reason and Belief in God' was largely concerned with deontological justification. *Deontology* deals with obligation, namely whether the Christian can have the right to believe in God or whether there is some obligation to refrain from such belief. Since then Plantinga has gone on to develop a theory of knowledge and demonstrate through this theory that Christianity is not only justified – violating no epistemic obligations – but can in fact constitute knowledge. In his book *Warrant and Proper Function (WPF)*<sup>49</sup> Plantinga focuses on how a belief could have a sufficient amount of 'warrant' to be considered knowledge.<sup>50</sup> As the title suggests, the centrepiece of the book is the model of proper function: here we see that Plantinga's criteria for the attainment of warrant or knowledge involve a belief which is produced by

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<sup>48</sup> However, let us say I read *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* by Daniel Dennett and I come to believe this is sufficient to remove my justification for theistic belief. I can always 'fight back' by seeking a rebuttal (such as Plantinga's witty review of Dennett's book in the journal *Books and Culture*). In this way I can *regain* theism as a justified, properly basic belief. It is in this area that apologetics play an important role, although the role Plantinga conceives for apologetics is in a negative capacity: rebutting arguments against the faith rather than establishing arguments for the faith.

<sup>49</sup> *Warrant and Proper Function*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>50</sup> Epistemologists generally agree that to have knowledge one must have a belief which is true and justified. Plantinga argues that when a justified true belief constitutes knowledge it has an extra element called warrant.

cognitive faculties working properly, successfully aimed at truth, in a congenial epistemic environment. This definition is not in fact as difficult as it may look. In fact, Plantinga's idea is in many ways elegantly simple. First let us consider the phrase 'cognitive faculties working properly'. Cognitive faculties include sense perception, intuition, and (according to Plantinga) the *sensus divinitatis*. Second, to have knowledge these faculties must be working properly, which simply means in accord with the way they are intended to work. When eyes work properly they provide accurate visual representations of the world, while my watch when working properly gives me the correct time.

These faculties must also be 'aimed at truth'. This clause is necessary because cognitive faculties can be aimed at different doxastic goals apart from the attainment of truth. For instance, consider a famous rugby player who is stricken ill with a disease that results in fatalities 99% of the time. However, he remains confident he will recover and he releases a statement to the press which reads: 'I will beat this virus like I beat my puny opponents'. This belief does not seem warranted by the evidence. It seems that were his cognitive faculties working properly *and aimed at truth*, he would have formed the belief that he will probably die. His belief clearly has another important purpose: not the attainment of truth but of survival. In relation to this goal his cognitive faculties may be operating fine, but with another end than attaining truth in view. And so whether the belief aids his survival, it yields little by way of warrant or knowledge.

Plantinga's criteria also include the important requirement that one's cognitive faculties are *successfully* aimed at truth, for it does no good to attempt to attain knowledge, and yet fail to do so. I may strain to see who is coming through the fog and conclude tentatively that it is a tall man. In fact it is an alien dressed in human disguise. In such a condition I may get an 'A' for effort, but I will not get knowledge.

Perhaps the most difficult part of the definition to understand is the last, but it too is really quite straightforward. An 'epistemic environment' is your current surroundings in which you attain beliefs and knowledge. If you are sitting in a classroom right now,

that is your epistemic environment. If you are presently standing on top of Angel Falls in Venezuela you have a very different – and doubtless more spectacular – epistemic environment. And such an environment is congenial if it does not inhibit the production of true beliefs. To get the idea clearer, think of an environment that is *not* congenial to producing true beliefs. Consider your first week in September as a freshman at a rowdy American university. You see an advertisement for a ‘drunk tank’ during orientation week. Curious, you go to the student union building where you see a large plexi-glass room that is being inundated with alcohol fumes in such a way that the people inside slowly become intoxicated. With intoxication comes impaired judgement and the decreased capacity to form true beliefs. Such a drunk tank would not be a congenial epistemic environment, for were you to enter it, you would likely generate beliefs – such as that you can sing better than Cliff Richard – which would have little warrant and so would not constitute knowledge.

Despite the simplicity and elegance of Plantinga’s theory of knowledge, it has one obvious drawback for those who hold a naturalistic worldview (the view that only the material world exists): its notion of ‘design plan’ suggests a designer. Plantinga states:

So suppose you are a naturalist, and are convinced that there is no way to make sense of the notion of proper function from a naturalistic perspective. ... Then you do have a serious objection to the analysis of warrant I propose and you will have to reject it. Indeed, you will have to reject the notion of proper function as well. If you are dead certain naturalism is true, you will have to accept the cost, not only of rejecting this account of warrant, but of rejecting the very idea of proper function. A high price, no doubt – but no more than what a serious naturalism exacts. (214)

In *Warranted Christian Belief* (WCB) Plantinga shifts his focus from dealing primarily with theistic belief *simpliciter* (e.g. belief that God exists) to specifically Christian belief. In the book he argues that full Christian belief can be rational, justified, and if it is true, warranted (thus constituting knowledge). Plantinga deals with two important



questions with relation to the epistemic standing of Christian faith: the *de jure* question and the *de facto* question. The individual making the *de jure* charge against Christianity asserts that regardless of whether Christianity is true, a person is epistemically derelict (e.g. irrational, unjustified) to believe it. This position is grounded in the evidentialist requirement that whether or not a belief is true, one must have evidence for it in order to believe it. The second question, the *de facto*, is concerned with whether or not Christianity is true. In WCB Plantinga rejects this separation of the *de jure* and *de facto* questions. He is not saying that if Christianity is true the Christian will always have warrant for believing it, but rather that the likelihood of the Christian having warrant is greatly increased if Christianity is true. Hence, he concludes that the central question must be the *truth* of Christianity. This question is theological and has distinct implications for the justification and warrant of Christianity. Let us see how the argument proceeds.

Plantinga first considers the veracity of the *de jure* charge. He concludes that the most serious formulation of this challenge is proffered by Freud and Marx. Of especial interest is Freud who alleges that theistic belief is an illusion arising from wish-fulfilment. (According to Plantinga's theory of knowledge, such a belief would have little warrant for this reason.) Plantinga summarises the Freudian rationale as follows:

There is no good argument from this fact about [theism's] origin to the conclusion that it is false; nor is it that someone who recognises its origin in wishful thinking will simply see that it is false. It is rather just that people of sense who know something about how the world works will take it to be probably false. They will take the same attitude toward theistic and Christian belief that they take toward the stories in Greek or Aztec or Persian mythology: we can't really prove that these stories are false, but their chances of being true are pretty slim. (162)

As formidable as the F and M complaint is, Plantinga concludes that it is all bark and no bite, for it proceeds by simply *assuming that Christianity is false without evidence*. Only in this way can it argue that Christianity is an irrational belief. In making this observation,

Plantinga concludes that the distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* questions is not tenable: one cannot offer a viable *de jure* objection without arguing or assuming that theistic belief is in fact *untrue*. However, Plantinga can see no argument against Christianity or theism that has thus far been successful and so the objection is reduced to an unsupported assumption.<sup>51</sup>

So the F and M complaint assumes without basis that Christianity is false. But what if we assume Christianity is *true*? Could a Christian then have knowledge of its truth? Plantinga thinks so, and he argues for this conclusion by positing a theological model, the A/C (Aquinas/Calvin) model.<sup>52</sup> Plantinga believes that our metaphysical commitments are foundational to what may be deemed rational or warranted:

What you properly take to be rational, at least in the sense of warranted, depends on what sort of metaphysical and religious stance you adopt. It depends on what kind of beings you think human beings are, what sorts of beliefs you think their noetic faculties will produce when they are functioning properly, and which of their faculties or cognitive mechanisms are aimed at the truth. (190)

To develop a Christian model, Plantinga appeals once again to Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*, noting that it is intended to produce knowledge of God in people, but is suppressed by sin. To recap the argument in 'RBG', the SD produces beliefs which are properly basic, in a similar way to perception, memory and *a priori* beliefs. In the dress of Plantinga's proper function theory of knowledge: 'The purpose of the *sensus divinitatis* is to enable us to have true beliefs about God; when it functions properly, it ordinarily *does* produce true beliefs about God. These beliefs therefore meet the conditions

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<sup>51</sup> The most serious contender – the problem of evil – has been dealt with by Plantinga in *God, Freedom, and Evil*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) and receives further treatment in ch. 14 of WCB.

<sup>52</sup> Although Plantinga uses Christian theological categories to develop this model, he is clear that the initial A/C model could be adapted to other forms of theism such as Islam and Judaism.

for warrant; if the beliefs produced are strong enough, then they constitute knowledge.' (179, emphasis in original) Thus, Plantinga turns the F and M complaint on its head: it is not those who believe in God who are dysfunctional, but rather those who do not!

Plantinga next extends the basic A/C model to fully Christian belief which is 'revealed to our minds'. The Christian is warranted in a three-stage process, by reading scripture, being instigated by the Holy Spirit, and then receiving faith from the Holy Spirit. Consider an example: a person sits down and reads say, the story of Jesus turning water into wine. He then receives the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit as he reads, and can pronounce in faith: 'What is said simply seems right; it seems compelling; one finds oneself saying "Yes, that's right, that's the truth of the matter; this is indeed the word of the Lord"' (250) Thus, warrant would apply as a natural result of the proper function model we examined above being applied to Christian belief. Since the model outlines that the belief in Christian truths comes not through an argument from experience or some other deductive means, the Bible can be taken in this properly basic way. It is self-authenticating in the sense that it has evidence in itself which can affect a person in a similar way to perception or memory beliefs. The faith that is produced is consequently far from being a blind leap: 'You might as well claim that a memory belief, or the belief that  $3 + 1 = 4$  is a leap in the dark.'(263)

Plantinga does not stop here however, for in Christian belief that which is revealed to my mind must also be sealed to my heart. In other words, the cognitive, propositional knowledge of God that I have received must express itself in my life. Consider an analogy. When you get married it is not enough to recognise that your spouse exists and to accept rationally that he is faithful and a good provider. To *know* him as your spouse, you must also *love* him. (It is not a surprise that the biblical writers speak of sexual intercourse as knowledge!) Hence, if you do not love your spouse, neither do you really know him. Similarly, it is not enough to know God as the necessary postulate in a philosophical argument (e.g. the unmoved mover). From a biblical view, one cannot truly *know* God without falling on one's knees in worship: we know God as we love God. To emphasise the point, Plantinga speaks at length about the erotic

aspects of the love of God, and closes by writing that love between people 'is a sign or type of something deeper: mature human love for God, on the one hand, and, on the other, the love of God displayed both among the members of the trinity and in God's love for his children.' (323) Hence, faith is a sure and certain knowledge which arises by being revealed to our minds and then sealed to our hearts. It is justified, rational, and if true, it constitutes knowledge, indeed the most important knowledge there could be.

### *Evaluation*

Plantinga's work has undergone significant development from 'Reason and Belief in God' to *Warranted Christian Belief*. While 'RBG' was roundly criticised for failing to offer a criterion of proper basicity, Plantinga has gone some distance to answering this charge with his proper function theory of knowledge. Plantinga's whole argument has been concerned to show that (1) Christians do not need to have evidence that Christianity is true to rationally believe it and have knowledge of it; (2) however, they are still obliged to counter arguments *against* Christian faith. Together, these two propositions seem to steer a careful course between strong foundationalism and scepticism or fideism. However, underlying these two propositions is a distinction between positive and negative apologetics which is not entirely unproblematic. The root of Plantinga's anti-evidentialism is the teaching of Reformed theology that people persist in disbelief not because of lack of evidence, but rather because of sinful rebellion. One difficulty with this view is that it often seems as if people *are* seeking good arguments. Is it really credible that all failure to believe is rooted in sin? Indeed, if some people claim to have come to the faith on the power of arguments, might we have some sort of *obligation* to seek positive arguments, not to justify our faith, but to present it credibly to the non-believer? There is a further problem with this distinction: rebuttals to arguments against Christian faith often have a tendency to become positive arguments. Let us say for example that a sceptic comes up to me and sneers that there is no evidence that Jesus ever lived. As I respond to his 'argument' by providing evidence to the contrary, it seems I inevitably am also presenting a positive argument *for* Christian faith.

Finally, while Plantinga offers a powerful critique of attempts to argue for the truth of Christianity via philosophical argumentation, many a reader will likely be somewhat dissatisfied by his alternative conclusion that *if Christianity is true, then it is probably warranted*.

While some will believe Plantinga has been unduly dismissive of unaided human reason, others will conclude he has been too optimistic. This objection, likely to be raised by some theologians, would take issue with Plantinga's methodological progression from general truths about God as in the generic theism assumed by the proper function model and the A/C model in chapter 6 of *WCB*, to specifically Christian belief. They would counter that Plantinga has attempted to know *too much* by philosophical reasoning (e.g. the proper function of our cognitive faculties suggest a designer) prior to specific consultation of Christian revelation. Further, Plantinga appears to underestimate the Christian doctrines which would be relevant to epistemology. For instance, he never explores the epistemological implications of the monumentous assertion that Jesus Christ *is* the Truth (John 14:6). And the extended A/C model never mentions the Church, though the vast majority of people who come to faith do so through other Christians. This raises an important question: has Plantinga surrendered the epistemological insights that could have been wrought from a full-orbed Christian theological model in favour of philosophical economy?

## Wolterstorff, Alston, Plantinga: Summary

Considering the amount of ground we have traversed in the preceding pages, it would be wise to briefly summarise the survey thus far. Wolterstorff began us off by critiquing strong foundationalism for its failure to achieve the certain, indubitable foundations it requires. While the failure of strong foundationalism does not mean that epistemic anarchy reigns, it does demand a reformulation of how we arrive at knowledge. He then noted that there is no reason why the Christian cannot allow his fundamental religious commitments to function as control beliefs in the formation and evaluation of theories.

Alston makes his case by drawing parallels between sensory experience and mystical experience. While both are in a sense circular, they can still be accepted as providing *prima facie* rational and justified beliefs so long as they are socially established doxastic systems of belief which are not demonstrably unreliable and have good self-support. Alston alleges that objections to the parallel between CMP and SP are either epistemically imperialistic (demanding that CMP must be a doxastic practice like SP) or reflect a double standard (that CMP must meet more stringent standards than SP). The most formidable problem in maintaining a parallel arises from religious pluralism. Alston recognises this difficulty but does not consider it insuperable; he recommends that people are still justified to continue developing their beliefs within their particular doxastic community, given that they have practical rationality.

Plantinga completes Wolterstorff's critique of strong foundationalism. He notes that if we accept strong foundationalism, then most of what we believe is irrational (including memory and inferential beliefs); and as if that is not bad enough, strong foundationalism is self-referentially incoherent. In response, Plantinga advocates a moderate foundationalism which surrenders the criterion of certainty and places belief in God in the foundations. Plantinga justifies this move by appealing to Calvin's teaching of the *sensus divinitatis*: if such a cognitive device is real, we can arrive at beliefs in God in this basic way. In later work Plantinga defends a

theory of knowledge called proper function. According to this model, Plantinga argues that if Christianity is true, then the human being is likely functioning properly when he forms beliefs about God. On this more recent account Plantinga continues to utilise the *sensus divinitatis* and also includes the internal instigation (testimony) of the Holy Spirit and the role of Holy Scripture. In this way Plantinga concludes that the *de jure* and *de facto* questions are bound up together. Thus the real question is whether Christianity is true: if it is, the Christian can be said, for all intents and purposes, to have knowledge.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> For an engaging and accessible summary of Reformed epistemology, see Kelly James Clark, *Return to Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990). Similar issues are covered in William Davis, 'Theistic Arguments', and Caleb Miller, 'Faith and Reason', both in *Reason for the Hope Within*, Michael J. Murray, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

## Back to Heaven's Gate

It is one thing to argue that Christian belief can operate as a control belief or be properly basic and constitute knowledge. But how do these Reformed theories apply to the difficult cases of belief, those which clearly lie beyond the perimeters of rationality, such as that of the Heaven's Gate members? Whatever its obvious faults, strong foundationalism found an enduring popularity precisely in the self-assured confidence with which it could condemn beliefs like those of the Heaven's Gate cult. Locke would have demanded that reason must be our judge in everything, Clifford, that we never believe anything on insufficient evidence. But we can no longer live in the illusory security of this type of foundationalism. How can Reformed epistemology maintain its critique and yet respond convincingly to the tragic events at Sante Ranche, thus distinguishing Christian belief from that of Heaven's Gate in a way that is convincing and not simply ad hoc?

Wolterstorff simply does not concern himself with such cases, and it could be that his silence is something of a response itself. Need we concern ourselves with every bizarre possibility just because we hold our beliefs as controls? Surely we can agree there *is* a difference between Christian theism and the Heaven's Gate cult, even if we cannot address precisely what the difference is. At this point we may recall the wise maxim: the existence of twilight is no argument against the distinction between day and night. In other words, simply because you cannot discern the point at which day turns to night, you can still discern the difference *between* day and night. Similarly, though we cannot clearly delineate at which point a belief, or belief system becomes irrational or unjustified, it seems clear from the arguments we have seen that Christianity *is* rational while Heaven's Gate is not. Further exploration of these issues should (and no doubt will) continue, but in the meantime we need not be committed to a sceptical thesis that obliterates the difference: that surely would be unwarranted. Despite the criticism raised against Alston, his criterion of practical rationality is also a valuable general guide to weed out the most irrational belief systems. The point is that Heaven's Gate did *not* become the majority view in North America, and thus we see a further testimony of its



irrationality. Contrast this with more established doxastic communities like Christianity which place important limitations on belief. While Plantinga's model is limited to traditional theism, and particularly Christian theism, he does recognise that a version could be used to defend other religious traditions. But it is highly dubious that a coherent and convincing cognitive model could be adapted for beliefs as cognitively bizarre as that of Heaven's Gate.

Perhaps the most important lesson to take from Reformed epistemology, and from moderate foundationalism more generally, is that one need not have certainty to know there is truth and to engage in a meaningful search for that truth, in science, politics, art, and yes, in religion. Knowledge does not begin with one holding certain indubitable beliefs, but rather with a commitment to a belief about which one could be wrong. As we have seen, the procrustean bed of certainty limits us to the subjectivity of our own minds. As Lesslie Newbigin has noted: 'Only statements that can be doubted make contact with reality.'<sup>54</sup> This is simply a fact of the limitations of human existence.<sup>55</sup> If we demand certainty and proof for the things we know most intimately and basically we are headed to scepticism (*What chair?*) and very possibly existential despair (*What's the point?*). But as we have seen, we need not have certainty to know the philosopher's chair exists. And if we cannot 'prove' the chair exists, why should we demand such proof of God? So we can answer the student's question of 'what chair?' by saying: why the one I am sitting on! Conversely, to the anti-realist challenge of 'what God', we respond: why the one who has revealed himself to me. Who can say such a response to our experience of chairs and God is anything but reasonable? Hence, Locke's pervasive maxim – 'Reason must be our last judge and guide in everything' – must

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<sup>54</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: faith, doubt, and certainty in Christian discipleship*, (London: SPCK, 1995), 52. Newbigin's book is excellent, but for a more involved analysis see Michael Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

<sup>55</sup> Theologically speaking this limitation in human knowledge is limited to our earthly existence. In the new heavens and new earth when, as theologians describe it, we receive the 'beatific vision' of God, we will indeed know God (and likely much else) with certainty.

itself be judged, and according to the *reasons* put forward by Reformed epistemology, it must be judged a failure. This however is an opportunity to embrace a chastened, self-consciously perspectival reason as well as to recognise the limits of human knowledge, and the important, perhaps central role that God can play in seeking and attaining that knowledge.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> I would like to extend my thanks to all those who read the manuscript and offered comments, and in particular to Daniel Hill for his input, which ranged from penetrating philosophical criticisms to identifying minor typographical errors. Thanks are also in order to Daniel Strange and all those at the Religious and Theological Studies Fellowship for their encouragement and support.

## Glossary

*A/C (Aquinas/Calvin) Model:* Plantinga's model which demonstrates how, if Christianity is true, the Christian may come to have warranted belief and knowledge of it. The process occurs through the reading of Scripture and the testimony of the Holy Spirit, which results in the production of the specific knowledge of faith.

*basic and nonbasic beliefs:* according to the foundationalist, basic beliefs are those which are accepted without evidence (or have their own self-evidence). Nonbasic beliefs are properly held insofar as they trace to basic beliefs.

*de facto:* in fact, in reality.

*de jure:* rightfully; according to the law.

*design plan:* a crucial aspect of Plantinga's proper function theory of knowledge which says that cognitive beings are designed according to a particular plan to produce true beliefs which constitute knowledge.

*epistemology:* the branch of philosophy which deals with theories of what knowledge is and how we come to possess it.

*evidentialism:* a position closely aligned to foundationalism which requires that evidence or reasons are necessary to rationally hold a (non-basic) belief.

*falsificationism:* a theory from science which claims that one essential criterion for a belief's being knowledge is that it be in principle falsifiable. That is, it must be testable such that if it is false it could be demonstrated to be so. So for example, the existence of God cannot be conclusively demonstrated to be false. Thus, according to falsificationism we cannot have knowledge of God.

*F and M (Freud and Marx) Complaint:* Freud and Marx's claim that Christian belief is unjustified and irrational because it is produced by wish-fulfilment (Freud) or delusion (Marx). Plantinga notes that the complaint does not succeed because it implicitly *assumes* that Christianity is false (that it indeed *is* created by delusion or

wish-fulfilment) and then infers that it therefore is irrational to believe it.

foundationalism: a family of theories of knowledge that seek a fundamental basis (or foundation) of beliefs (basic beliefs) which support other beliefs. This basis is seen to provide rational justification and knowledge for one's other beliefs. There are different versions of this theory, and I will use the following terms: Simple foundationalism is limited to the basic foundationalist thesis. Strong foundationalism adds the premise that the foundational beliefs must be certain. Moderate foundationalism argues that foundational beliefs need not be certain.

Great Pumpkin Objection: a *reductio ad absurdum* style objection to Alvin Plantinga's epistemological theory (that is, it seeks to demonstrate Plantinga's theory is false by charging that absurd consequences follow from it). If belief in God is rational without evidence (so the objection goes) then so is belief in the Great Pumpkin. But this is clearly false, so Plantinga's theory must be rejected.

justification: the epistemic quality which is attributed to a belief when a person is violating no epistemic obligations in holding that belief.

knowledge: generally accepted to be a belief that is true and justified. Philosophers disagree over what further component may be necessary to have knowledge. Plantinga suggests a quality he calls warrant.

mystical perception (MP): Alston's term to describe religious experience or perception of God.

natural theology: the attempt to arrive at knowledge of God by rational reflection on the natural world apart from the special revelation of a particular religion.

noetic structure: the form by which our beliefs hold together in our minds. Foundationalists believe the noetic structure is like a pyramid. At the base are our basic beliefs from which further (non-basic) beliefs are derived. Coherentists believe a more

accurate metaphor for the structure is that of a web: all our beliefs hold together as a collective whole with no specific class being more basic.

postmodern epistemology: a range of positions which reject any theory of truth or justification that is objectively (as opposed to subjectively) true. Postmodern theories tend to be pragmatic or coherentist.

practical rationality: Alston's term for the quality one has when they possess *prima facie* justification allotted by a socially established doxastic (belief-forming) practice.

probabilism: the attempt in strong foundationalism to relate non-basic beliefs to basic beliefs by the way of the former being probably true on the basis of the latter.

proper function (theory of): Alvin Plantinga's epistemological theory which argues that a belief is warranted if it is produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly in an appropriate epistemic environment.

rationality: a quality demonstrated by cognitive agents when they form and hold beliefs on appropriate grounds. Anthony Kenny describes rationality tersely as 'the mean between credulity and scepticism'.

Reformed epistemology: a philosophical movement, inspired by one branch of Reformed theology, which argues that a Christian may hold beliefs in God without evidence.

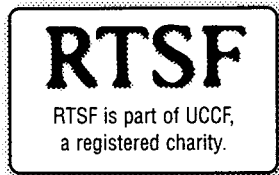
Reformed theology: a Protestant branch of Christian theology, originating with John Calvin which emphasises the sovereignty of God.

*sensus divinitatis* (SD): the human 'sense of the divine'. A Latin term employed by the theologian John Calvin and more recently by Alvin Plantinga which (in Plantinga's case) refers to a faculty within humans which receives data and forms beliefs about God.

Warrant: the term Alvin Plantinga uses to designate the element that separates mere justified true belief from knowledge.

**In this monograph, Randal Rauser describes and evaluates the school of epistemology known as 'Reformed Epistemology,' focussing on its three main proponents: Nicholas Wolterstorff, William Alston and Alvin Plantinga.**

**Randal was born and raised in Canada where he completed a Master of Christian Studies as Regent College. Currently Randal lives in London with his wife Jasper and is engaged in doctoral research in systematic theology at King's College, London.**



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