

A Reading in Religious Epistemology:
Reformed Epistemology and Objection to it

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ABSTRACT

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Hossein Houshmand

One of the contemporary movements that has inspired the new discussions in religious epistemology is Reformed Epistemology. This movement is associated with Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and William Alston. These philosophers have established some very fundamental challenges to the epistemology of religious belief that has dominated the Western thought since the Enlightenment. In contrast to the evidentialist tradition, Reformed Epistemology emphasizes that belief in God can have rationality, justification or warrant without being based on propositional evidence (argument). Some philosophers, such as Philip Quinn, deny the sufficiency of this justification for well-informed contemporary theists. Quinn argues that there are "defeaters" for the non-inferential justification of theistic belief, particularly the problem of evil, projective explanations of religion, and the problem of religious pluralism. The present research will explore the above issues, it and comes to the conclusion that for rational justification of belief in God for well-informed contemporary theists, additional positive argumentative supports are needed.

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Introduction

One of the most influential movements in contemporary philosophy of religion is *Reformed Epistemology*, a project powerfully developed and supported in the last two decades by philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and William Alston. Its central principle is that belief in God, as conceived in traditional Christianity, Judaism and Islam, can be immediate or *properly basic*. Reformed Epistemology claims that theistic belief can be (and is for *some* people, in the appropriate circumstances) rational or justified, even in the absence of propositional evidence. In Plantinga's words, it can be "entirely acceptable, desirable, right, proper, and rational to accept belief in God without any argument or evidence whatever."¹

This is not meant to imply that immediate theistic beliefs are groundless. Instead, the idea is that a properly basic belief is unmediated by other *beliefs*, but such beliefs do have non-propositional grounds: typical grounds for basic theistic belief include certain religious experiences.

¹ Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality*, eds. Alvin plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dome: University of Notre Dome Press, 1983), p. 39.

Reformed Epistemology emerged as a powerful response to Evidentialism, an essential part of the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment critique of religious belief.

Evidentialism is the view that rational beliefs or knowledge require the possession of evidence of some sort. Applied to religious belief, evidentialism is the view that religious beliefs are rational only if a person has adequate evidence in support of those beliefs. "Evidence" in this context refers to propositional evidence, i.e., other rational beliefs. Accordingly, the evidentialist *objection* to religious belief is the view that religious belief fails to be rational or justified because there is not sufficient evidence for such beliefs.

This opinion comes into harsh challenge from Reformed Epistemologists. For example, Alvin Plantinga claims that the evidentialist position, which is rooted in classical foundationalism, is epistemologically implausible. Classical foundationalism maintains the only beliefs that are properly basic are either self-evident (e.g., $2 + 2 = 4$), about one's immediate mental states (e.g., I am feeling pain), or evident to the senses (e.g., there is a tree outside). But since religious beliefs are neither self-evident, nor about one's immediate introspective experience, nor evident to the senses, they cannot be properly basic.

Plantinga argues that classical foundationalism is self-referentially incoherent and has the rather implausible implication that most of our commonsense everyday beliefs are unjustified. We hold many justified basic beliefs that do not satisfy classical foundationalism's criteria for proper basicity. For instance, belief in other minds, the existence of the past, and the external world, are not self-evident or about one's own mental life, or evident to the senses. Plantinga, thus, argues that a person who holds theistic belief in a basic way does not necessarily violate any intellectual obligations.

The first part of the present research will examine Reformed Epistemology, and the second part will explore some significant objections to it.

Within the broad literature on Reformed Epistemology, Philip Quinn's articles are both challenging and important. Quinn grants that immediate belief about God- in the way described by Reformed Epistemologists- can have justification or warrant. But he maintains that this justification is not sufficient by itself to make belief in God rational for most well-informed theists in contemporary culture. He argues that, in the typical case, this non-inferential justification will be outweighed by the kinds of objections to theistic belief that are widespread in contemporary intellectual culture. Following Quinn, I will explore such

objections, namely, the problem of evil, projective explanations of religious belief, and the problem of religious pluralism. This paper, finally, reaches the conclusion that for rationality of belief in God for well-informed contemporary adults, an additional positive case is needed, in the form of some kind of natural theology.

This paper addresses the earlier phase of this new direction in religious epistemology. In its earlier phase, Reformed Epistemology's strategy was a negative apologetics which makes belief in God epistemically *permissible*, but it does not provide us with a reason for supposing that theistic belief is true. However, I do not intend here to treat the second phase of Reformed Epistemology, which is rather positive apologetics. This positive phase has been developed in Alston's account of justification of religious beliefs grounded in religious experience, in his *perceiving God*; Wolterstorff's account of entitlement in his *Divine Discourse*; and particularly in Plantinga's account of warrant in his trilogy, *Warrant: the Current Debate*, *Warrant and Proper Function*, and *Warranted Christian Beliefs*.²

² William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate*, *Warrant and Proper Function*, and *Warranted Christian Beliefs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, 1993, and 2000).

Part I

Introduction to Reformed Epistemology

1. The Evidentialist Challenge to Theism

I. Evidentialism

One of the main disputed questions since the Enlightenment has been the question whether religious belief is *rational or reasonable or acceptable or justified*. This is a distinct way of looking at the rationality of theistic and religious belief according to which belief in God is rational only if it is based on reasons which provide adequate evidential support for it. The view has been dominant from the Enlightenment on, and has been dominant throughout most of the twentieth century - so-called tradition of *evidentialism*.

In the 19th century William K. Clifford gave a brief statement of the evidentialist position: "To sum up: it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence". He wrote "If a man, holding a belief which he was taught in childhood or persuaded of afterwards, keeps down and perhaps away any doubts which arise about it in his mind ... and regards as impious those questions which cannot easily be asked without disturbing it - the life

of that man is one long sin against mankind...."³ Similarly this century Brand Blanshard maintained: "everywhere and always belief has an ethical aspect. There is such a thing as a general ethics of the intellect. The main principle of that ethic I hold to be the same inside and outside religion. This principle is simple and sweeping: Equate your assent to the evidence."⁴ And Bertrand Russell wrote: "Give to any hypothesis which is worth your while to consider just that degree of credence which the evidence warrants."⁵

The evidentialist position, accordingly, is that no religious belief-system is capable of meeting the high standards of proof (requirements of evidentialism) that should govern all of our believing, and so reasonable and moral person must do without religious beliefs. But not all evidentialists have been hostile to religion. Indeed a few evidentialists –such as Descartes, Locke, and Leibniz- have thought that belief in God's existence, and other typical religious beliefs, are fully capable of being defended in a way that meets the challenge.

As time went on, however, more and more philosophers concluded that the theism *cannot* be defended in a way that satisfies the requirements of evidentialism. For most of the twentieth century

³ William K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in Michael Peterson and others, eds., *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.70.

⁴ Brand Blanshard, *Reason and Belief* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974), p. 401.

⁵ Bertrand Russell, *Why I am not a Christian* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957), p. 3.

this way of thinking was orthodoxy. Anthony Flew writes with reference to theistic belief:

It is by reference to this inescapable demand for grounds that the presumption of atheism is justified. If it is to be established that there is a God, then we have to have good grounds for believing that this is indeed so. Until or unless some such grounds are produced we have literally no reason at all for believing; and in that situation the only reasonable posture must be that of either the negative atheist or the agnostic.⁶

The basic evidentialist package, then, includes two claims:

(I) It is irrational or unreasonable to accept religious belief in the absence of sufficient evidence or reasons.

(II) We have no evidence or at any rate not sufficient evidence for the proposition that God exists.

⁶ Anthony Flew, *The Presumption of Atheism* (London: Pemberton, 1976), p. 22.

II. Critique of Evidentialism

One of the most important developments in the philosophy of religion in recent years is the appearance of a group of philosophers who sharply reject evidentialism. These philosophers are not fideist; they do not think that one's ultimate beliefs are immune to rational evaluation. But they maintain that it is possible for religious beliefs to be entirely rational or justified even if there is no evidence supporting these beliefs. This view is so-called "Reformed Epistemology" (because some of its adherents taught at Calvin College and to some extent looked for inspiration to John Calvin and others in the tradition of Reformed theology.) The three leading exponents of Reformed Epistemology are Alvin Plantinga (1932-), Nicholas Wolterstorff (1932-), and William P. Alston (1921-). In the following sections, I will explore each of them, particularly the position of Plantinga and Alston.

A. Classical Foundationalism

The first thing we must do is to understand more precisely what is meant by *evidentialist challenge*, so we can then see why the Reformed epistemologists object to it. Nicholas Wolterstorff nicely presents the issue as follows:

It was insisted, in the first place, that it would be *wrong* for a person to accept Christianity, or any other form of theism, unless it was *rational* for him to do so. And it was insisted, secondly, that it is not rational for a person to do so unless he holds his religious convictions on the basis of other beliefs of his which give to those convictions adequate evidential support. No religion is acceptable unless rational, and no religion is rational unless supported by evidence. That is the evidentialist challenge.⁷

Alvin Plantinga takes the evidentialist challenge to be based on epistemological perspective known as *foundationalism*, specifically *classical foundationalism*. Foundationalists distinguish between two kinds of beliefs that we all have. There are, on the one hand, beliefs that we hold because they receive *evidential support* from other beliefs that we have; these we may term *derived beliefs*. But there are also some beliefs that are accepted without being supported by other beliefs; these are our *basic beliefs*, and they form the "basis" on which our whole structure of belief and knowledge finally rests.

An essential part of the foundationalist position is the specification of what beliefs are appropriate as basic or foundational in a rational noetic structure. Which beliefs will be rational for a person to hold other than on the basis of other (rational) beliefs? In short, which beliefs are *properly* or justifiably basic? Classical foundationalism holds to narrow criteria of proper basicity. As

⁷ From the Introduction to Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, eds., (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 6.

Plantinga explains it, classical foundationalism maintains that a basic belief is properly basic if and only if it is either (a) evident to the senses (e.g., there is a tree outside my window), (b) self-evident (e.g., $2 + 1 = 3$), or (c) about one's immediate experience (e.g. I am feeling pain).⁸ Plantinga mentions "a proposition is evident to the senses if we human beings have the power to determine its truth by looking at, listening to, tasting, or smelling some physical object."⁹ Self-evident means that beliefs are seen to be true by anyone who understands them like simple truths of arithmetic.

Concerning this epistemological framework of evidentialism, then we may formulate the evidentialist requirement as follows:

Given any person *S*, *S* is rational or justified in believing that *p* if and only if either (1) *p* is properly basic for *S* (i.e., self-evident, immediate experience, or evident to the senses for *S*) or (2) *S* believes *p* on the evidential basis of propositions that are properly basic.¹⁰

⁸ Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, eds, Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, pp.40-43.

⁹ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p.43.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.59.

Therefore, on the basis of the mentioned classical foundationalism principle, the evidentialist objection naturally developed in the following argument:

I. Theistic belief is rational only if it is based on other rational beliefs that provide adequate evidential support it.

II. There are no rational beliefs that provide adequate evidential support for theistic belief.

From which it follows that

III. Theistic belief is not rational.

The evidentialist challenge to theistic belief, then, claims that if belief in God is to be found in a rational noetic structure, then, it will be a non-basic belief in that structure. The evidentialist objection raised by the atheologist maintains the further claim that there is no sufficient evidence for theistic belief. Therefore, it is unreasonable or irrational to believe in God. But what is the result of the objector's claim that the theist is *irrational*?

Plantinga makes it clear that he understands the evidentialist challenge (as well as its epistemological framework namely, classical foundationalism) to be a normative thesis.

The first thing to see is that this [evidentialist] objection is rooted in a normative view. It lays down conditions that must be met by anyone whose system of beliefs is rational, and here "rational" is to be taken as a normative or evaluative term. According to the objector there is a right way and a wrong way

with respect to belief. People have responsibilities, duties, and obligations with respect to their believings just as with respect to their actions. . . .¹¹

The type of normativity here is deontological. Plantinga says:

The Cliffordian idea is that there is a sort of intellectual duty or obligation not to believe in God without having evidence, or sufficient evidence. If there is no evidence, or insufficient evidence, the believer is unjustified; she is flouting her epistemic duties. . . . Contemporary evidentialist objectors (for example, Brand Blanshard, Anthony Flew, John Mackie, Bertrand Russell, Michael Scriven). . . join Clifford in putting their objection in terms of obligations, permission and rights. . . .The problem with the believer in God, they say, is that she holds her beliefs without having sufficient evidence; and the problem with that is that it goes contrary to our intellectual duties and obligations. Evidentialist objectors to theistic belief argue that there is insufficient evidence for theistic belief, and to believe something for which you have insufficient evidence is to go contrary to your epistemic duties.¹²

On this way of looking at things, then, the sense in which it is necessary for a theist to base his belief in God on reasons is along deontological lines. By doing so he avoids violating his epistemic or intellectual duties. In the following sections, I shall examine the reformed epistemologist's claims in which theistic believer does not defeat or violate the epistemic duties.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.30.

¹² Plantinga, "The Prospects for Natural Theology". *Philosophical Perspectives* 5: pp. 290-291.

B. Reformed Epistemologist Objection to Evidentialism

Since the evidentialist challenge to theistic belief is rooted in classical foundationalism, the reformed epistemologists critique focused more directly on classical foundationalism. According to this principle, as we mentioned, two things follow. First, the principle claims that a proposition is basic if it is either self-evident, evident to the senses or about one's immediate experience. Secondly, the principle claims that a proposition is properly basic only if it meets one of these conditions. Now, Plantinga's critique of classical foundationalism focuses on this second element. Why suppose this is true? The argument comes down to two theses. If we accept classical foundationalism, then (i) we are not rational to accept most of our ordinary everyday beliefs and (ii) accepting classical foundationalism itself cannot be rational.

First, Plantinga argues that the basic principle of classical foundationalism is incompatible with our ordinary everyday beliefs that we take to be rational beliefs. Let us suppose for the moment that the classical foundationalism criterion of proper basicity is true. How many of our everyday beliefs - which we regard as rational - are self-evident or about our immediate experience or deducible from the basis of propositions that are? Very few of them. However, the

problem is that there are a whole lot of everyday beliefs which do not satisfy the classical foundationalist's requirements for proper basicity. Belief in the external world, other minds, the occurrence of past events, and the rest of our so-called common-sense beliefs or knowledge are not properly basic on the model of classical foundationalism. Consequently, these beliefs are rational only if they can receive adequate support from beliefs which are either self-evident or appropriately about one's immediate experience. Plantinga finds it hard to see how such beliefs can be deducible on the basis of some properly basic beliefs. It would seem then that on the view of classical foundationalism, many of our everyday beliefs are not rational. Under a deontological concept of rationality, individuals are violating some intellectual duty when they hold such beliefs.¹³

Second argument raises the question of *the coherence of classical foundationalism*. Plantinga claims that classical foundationalism appears to be self-referentially incoherent, as it does not fulfil the conditions of proper basicity it lays down, and it is difficult to see how it could be adequately supported by beliefs which do meet that narrow criterion. According to classical foundationalism, a person *S* is rational in accepting the principle of classical foundationalism only if that principle is either a properly basic belief or

¹³ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 59- 60.

a non-basic belief appropriately based upon a properly basic one. But if the principle of classical foundationalism is a properly basic belief, then it is either self-evident or about one's immediate experience. Clearly, the proposition in question - "a belief is properly basic if and only if it is either self-evident or appropriately about one's immediate experience" - meets neither of these conditions of proper basicity. Therefore, it is not a properly basic belief. If a person is rationally to believe it, then, it must be a non-basic belief based on beliefs which are themselves properly basic and where these beliefs provide adequate evidential support for the principle. Certainly, no classical foundationalist has ever produced an argument showing this. Therefore, belief in the proposition that asserts the classical foundationalist criteria of proper basicity is irrational. Anyone who accepts it is either flouting his intellectual duties or is in some way epistemically defective.¹⁴

On the basis of his critique, Plantinga concludes: "It is evident. . .that classical foundationalism is bankrupt, and in so far as the evidentialist objection is rooted in classical foundationalism, it is poorly rooted indeed."¹⁵

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

2. The Religious Epistemology of Alvin Plantinga

In the last chapter we examined the epistemology of evidentialism, and especially that epistemology as used as a premise in the evidentialist objection to theistic belief. The critique of evidentialism presented by Alvin Plantinga has prepared the way for a consideration of a position rival to classical evidentialism - so-called *Reformed epistemology*. This alternate way of thinking about the rationality of belief in God will involve the systematic refutation of the sorts of evidentialist requirements. Plantinga's religious epistemology is a complex one which has significant development over the last three decades. I shall restrict this chapter to examine Plantinga's epistemological views concerning theistic belief, particularly on his most influential essay: "Reason and Belief in God."

Despite rejecting classical foundationalism, Plantinga still accepts the foundationalist's distinction between basic and derived beliefs, as well as the assumption that there must be properly basic beliefs from which all of our other beliefs have to be derived if they are to be rationally justified. What he rejects is merely the foundationalist's restrictive criterion for what can qualify as properly basic beliefs. Over against the tradition of evidentialism, Plantinga claims that theistic

belief can be *properly basic* - rational without the satisfaction of evidentialist requirements. Belief in God can rationally belong to the foundations of one's noetic structure. Plantinga's proper basicity thesis is developed within the framework of the sort of moderate foundationalism.¹⁶

I. Moderate Foundationalism

The moderate account of foundationalism is rooted in the work of the 18th century Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid. Reid's epistemology, usually noted for its emphasis on the principles of common sense. Reid's point is that we have no more reason for trusting reason than we do for trusting our other sources of beliefs, and if we must doubt one of our sources of belief, then we will have to doubt them all.

Reid's argument shows that there is no argument for restricting properly basic beliefs to self-evident and about one's immediate experience. The reason why such beliefs are given foundational status is that they are generated by well-established practices of belief formation. It is precisely this point that requires the extension of the class of properly basic beliefs to include memory

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 73-78.

beliefs, beliefs that imply the existence of an external world, beliefs about the mental states of other persons, beliefs about the future, testimonial beliefs, and perceptual beliefs.

According to Reid, the human mind is fitted with a variety of belief-forming mechanisms, so that in appropriate circumstances these belief-forming dispositions are activated. For instance, some beliefs about the past are formed on the basis of memory experience, and beliefs about the physical world are formed on the basis of sensory experience. These beliefs are *immediate* beliefs since they are formed without inference from or mediation through other beliefs. In contrast to immediate beliefs, there are *mediate* beliefs, beliefs formed by the reasoning-disposition, according to which we are disposed to accept propositions on the basis of *propositional evidence*.

Moreover, Reid recognized the importance of an initial principle of *credulity* with reference to the various sources of beliefs we have discussed. Over against a principle of incredulity (that beliefs, or belief-forming practices, are to be considered "guilty until proven innocent"), Reid emphasized the importance of beliefs (or belief-forming dispositions) being innocent until proven guilty. Reid's account suggests that our immediate beliefs are produced by belief-forming

mechanisms which are activated by a kind of evidence under the appropriate experiential circumstances.¹⁷

II. Belief in God is Properly Basic

Reidian foundationalism provides an appropriate framework for laying out an epistemology of religious belief rival to evidentialism. Plantinga utilizes the Reidian epistemological framework to argue for the proper basicity of theistic belief. Plantinga's main argument is directed at showing that it is "entirely acceptable, desirable, right, proper, and rational to accept belief in God without any argument or evidence whatever."¹⁸

Hence Plantinga claims:

There are some people *S* such that (a) *S* believe in God, (b) *S*'s belief in God is rational, and (c) *S*'s belief in God is not based upon reasons.

First, an important clarification is needed as to (a) in above claim. Plantinga makes it clear that the actual theistic belief that is going to be properly basic is not *God exists* or *there is such a person*

¹⁷ Reid's epistemology is discussed in Alston, *Perceiving God* (pp. 151-155, 162-165), Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 183-185), and Wolterstorff, *Thomas Reid: The Story of Epistemology* (Cambridge University Press, 2001.)

¹⁸ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 39.

as God. The kind of beliefs that are taken as basic are actually beliefs like below -each of which self-evidently entails that God exists.

- (1) God is speaking to me.
- (2) God has created all this.
- (3) God disapproves of what I have done.
- (4) God forgives me.
- (5) God is to be thanked and praised.¹⁹

Secondly, (b) in mentioned claim must be clarified. The sort of rationality involved here is *prima facie* rationality. It can be rejected by sufficient reasons to the contrary. Moreover, the sense of rationality Plantinga has in mind here may be construed as *deontological*. He takes it that the evidentialist challenge is often expressed in terms of intellectual obligations. He argues that a person who believes in God in a basic way does not necessarily violate any epistemic duties. Thus the Reformed position is that "one who takes belief in God as basic is not thereby violating any epistemic duties".²⁰

Thirdly, the general formulation needs a bit more clarifying with reference to condition (c) in above proposition. How can a belief in God be basic and yet *rational* or *justified*?

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 80-82.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

Following Thomas Reid and Roderick Chisholm²¹, Plantinga lays out three properly basic beliefs; "perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, and beliefs ascribing mental states to other persons": I see a tree, I had breakfast this morning, and that person is in pain. In each of these cases the belief is typically basic, but not groundless. According to them, when I have certain kinds of perceptual experiences I am at least *prima facie* justified in supposing that I am perceiving a tree. That is, in the absence of sufficient reasons to the contrary, I am justified in supposing such belief. There are phenomenological conditions accompanied by a sort of felt inclination to form certain beliefs under some conditions. In such condition C, a person S will be rational or justified in believing that P in a basic way, namely without basing that belief on other justified beliefs. Plantinga thinks that these conditions are sometimes satisfied for theistic belief. According to Plantinga, there is a disposition to form belief in God in certain *experiential circumstances*.

Plantinga writes:

Calvin holds that God "reveals and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe," and the divine art "reveals itself in the innumerable and yet distinct and well ordered variety of the heavenly host." God has so created us that we have a tendency or disposition to see his hand in the world about us. More precisely, there is in us a disposition to believe

²¹ Plantinga, "Is belief in God Properly Basic," *Nous* 15, 1981, p. 47-48, and Alston, "Plantinga's Epistemology of Religious Belief" in J.E Tomberlin and P. van Inwagen, eds., *Alvin Plantinga* (1985), p.291.

propositions of the sort *this flower was created by God or this vast and intricate universe was created by God* when we contemplate the flower or behold the starry heavens or think about the vast reaches of the universe.²²

These widely realized conditions and circumstances activate belief in God. But the grounds are not limited to just these sorts of conditions, but include things like the reading of Scripture, the feeling of guilt, or a sense of God's presence or his speaking to us.

Upon reading The Bible, one may be impressed with a deep sense that God is speaking to him. Upon having done what I know is cheap, or wrong, or wicked I may feel guilty in God's sight and form the belief *God disapproves of what I've done*. Upon confession and repentance, I may feel forgiven, forming the belief *God forgive me for what I've done...*²³

Thus, when the Reformed Epistemologist claims that belief in God can be a justified belief even though it is not based upon reasons, he means, for some people certain beliefs that self-evidently entail God's existence are *properly basic* upon the appropriate sort of conditions or circumstances. Moreover, Plantinga's claim should be understood as a refutation of the evidentialist requirement. The theist is said to be "within his epistemic rights in believing in God's existence even if he has no argument or evidence at all."²⁴ "What the Reformers meant to hold is that it is entirely right, rational, reasonable, and

²² Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 80.

²³ Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" p.46.

²⁴ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p.30.

proper to believe in God without any evidence or argument at all."²⁵ In fact, Plantinga writes: "It is not that such a person is justified or rational in so believing by virtue of having an implicit argument. . .No, he does not need any argument for justification or rationality. . .he is perfectly rational in accepting belief in God as basic in the utter absence of any argument, deductive or inductive."²⁶

III. Reformed Epistemologist Objection to Natural Theology

Reformed Epistemologists, then, attempt to show that evidentialism is radically flawed and that theistic belief could possess certain positive epistemic statuses in the absence of evidence and argument, especially of the sort provided by natural theology. In the other word, if Reformed epistemologists critique of evidentialism is correct, then, it would seem that natural theology is unnecessary for theistic belief to be rational or justified. Plantinga and the other Reformed epistemologists have developed insights found in previous thinkers (from Calvin to Barth) and emphasized the immediacy of our natural knowledge of God, in contrast to both the tradition of Enlightenment evidentialism and the Thomistic tradition of natural theology, both of which have emphasized the importance of arguments for God's existence.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

Broadly stated, "*natural theology* is the attempt to demonstrate certain truth concerning God's existence and nature, operating from premises that are knowable by any rational person independently of divine revelation."²⁷ As C. Stephen Evans points out: "Many Protestants, especially those in the Reformed and Lutheran traditions, have historically been cool or hostile to natural theology and often to the whole enterprise of evidentialist apologetics."²⁸ In a similar way in his paper "The Reformed Tradition", Wolterstorff states a combination of the recent work of Reformed philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga and the theologians of the Reformed tradition centred on a "negative attitude" toward natural theology:

One of the most salient features of contemporary philosophy of religion in the Reformed tradition of Christianity is its negative attitude toward natural theology – this negative attitude ranging all the way from indifference to hostility. In this regard, the philosophers of the tradition reflect the dominant attitude of the theologians of the tradition, going all the way back to its most influential founder, John Calvin.²⁹

In looking at Calvin, Bavinck, and Barth, Alvin Plantinga concludes that "they think the Christian *ought not* to accept belief in

²⁷ Laura L. Garcia, "Natural Theology and the Reformed Objection", in C. Stephen Evans and Merold Westfall, eds., *Christian Perspective on Religious Knowledge* (1993), P.112.

²⁸ C. Stephen Evans, "Apologetics in a New key: Reviving Protestant anxieties over Natural Theology", In Mark McLeod and William Lane Graig, EDS., *The Logic of Rational Theism: Exploratory Essays* (Lewiston: E. Mellen Press, 1990), P.56.

²⁹ Wolterstorff, "The Reformed Tradition," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Philip Quinn (Blackwells, 1997), p. 165.

God on the basis of argument."³⁰ According to Plantinga, Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck emphasizes that we cannot acquire knowledge of God on the basis of argument, since the theistic proofs do not work. Furthermore, Scripture assumes the existence of God, and so the believer should take belief in God as a starting-point in his reasoning. And thirdly, belief in God is analogous to other beliefs we have (e.g., belief in the existence of the self, the external world, and the past) for which we typically do not need proof.

Bavinck wrote:

Scripture urges us to behold heaven and earth, birds and flowers and lilies, in order that we may see and recognize God in them. "Lift up your eyes on high, and see who hath created these." Is. 40:26. Scripture does not reason in the abstract. It does not make God the conclusion of a syllogism, leaving it to us whether we think the argument holds or not. But it speaks with authority. Both theologically and religiously it proceeds from God as the starting point.

We receive the impression that belief in the existence of God is based entirely upon these proofs. But indeed that would be "a wretched faith, which, before it invokes God, must first prove his existence." The contrary, however, is the truth.... Of the existence of self, of the world round about us, of logical and moral laws, etc., we are so deeply convinced because of the indelible impressions which all these things make upon our consciousness that we need no arguments or demonstration. Spontaneously, altogether involuntarily: without any constraint or coercion, we accept that existence. Now the same is true in regard to the existence of God. The so-called proofs are by no means the final grounds of our most certain conviction that God exists: This certainly is established only by faith; i.e., by the

³⁰ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p.72.

spontaneous testimony which forces itself upon us from every side.³¹

Plantinga also tell us that these Reformed thinkers emphasize that it is inappropriate to believe in God on the basis of arguments, since such arguments cannot produce the certainty which faith requires. Bavinck, for example, held that "the so-called proofs are by no means the final grounds of our most certain conviction that God exists." Plantinga adds that in Calvin's view, "the Christian ought not to believe on the basis of argument; if he does, his faith is likely to be "unstable and wavering," the "subject of perpetual doubt." Presumably this would make faith "subject to all the wayward whim and fancy of the latest academic fashion."³²

Thus, according to Plantinga, the Reformed objection to natural theology is actually twofold: First, reasons and arguments are *unnecessary* for the believer to have a justified belief in God and second, reasons and arguments are *inappropriate* as a basis for theistic belief. First claim, of course, follows from a refutation of the evidentialist requirement for theistic belief, but second is a substantially stronger claim.³³ As some authors realize it, the second claim is a consequence (drawn by the Reformed Epistemologist) from

³¹ Quote from Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology" in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, eds. Michael Peterson and others, p.310.

³² Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 72.

³³ Laura L. Garcia, "Natural Theology and the Reformed Objection", in *Christian Perspective on Religious Knowledge*, p.113.

the Platonic and Augustinian claim to the immediacy of knowledge of God, so central in the tradition of Reformed theology.³⁴

The central thesis that is repeated by Plantinga several times in "Reason and Belief in God", is stated most clearly in the following:

As these Reformed thinkers see things, one who takes belief in God as basic is not thereby violating any epistemic duties or revealing a defect in his noetic structure; quite the reverse. The correct or proper way to believe in God, they thought, was not on the basis of arguments from natural theology or anywhere else; *the correct way is to take belief in God as basic.*³⁵

V. Criteria for Properly Basic beliefs

Many philosophers, not surprisingly, have found this proposal of Reformed Epistemology to be daring and even astounding. It raises a great many issues and objections, I will treat just the crucial problem of criteria for proper basicity. The other objections will be scrutinize in some detail in the second part of the present research.

The question comes down to the process of arriving at a criterion of properly basic beliefs. As we mentioned Plantinga, himself a foundationalist in epistemology, rejects the criteria for "properly basic beliefs" established by classical foundationalism. He proposes,

³⁴ See Dewey J. Houtenga Jr., *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga: An introduction to Reformed Epistemology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 220.

³⁵ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p.72 (emphasis is mine.)

following Reid and Chisholm,³⁶ that the right way to arrive at such epistemic criteria is through an inductive procedure. This procedure is described as follows:

We must assemble examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are obviously properly basic in the latter, and examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are obviously *not* properly basic in the latter. We must then frame hypotheses as to the necessary and sufficient conditions of proper basicity and test these hypotheses by reference to those examples.³⁷

Plantinga, thus, adopts a non-classical form of foundationalism that widens the scope of properly basic beliefs and thereby allows him to place that belief in God in the foundations of some people's noetic structure.

An objection can be raised to this perspective. If we so widen the set of properly basic beliefs to include theistic belief, what prevents taking just any belief as properly basic? Suppose a person believes that the Great Pumpkin returns each Halloween. What is to stop someone from claiming that this belief is rational because it is properly basic? Following Plantinga's procedure for determining which beliefs are properly basic, might reasonably and properly conclude that the person's belief in the Great Pumpkin falls into this category.

³⁶ Roderick Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1966), p.57.

³⁷ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p.76.

Philip Quinn writes: "The difficulty is, of course, that this is a game any number can play. Followers of Muhammed, followers of Buddha, and even followers of the Reverend Moon can join in the fun."³⁸

Plantinga, however, does not see this as a serious objection.

He writes:

Criteria for proper basicity... should be argued to and tested by a relevant set of examples. But there is no reason to assume, in advance, that everyone will agree on the examples. The Christian will of course suppose that belief in God is entirely proper and rational; if he doesn't accept this belief on the basis of other propositions, he will conclude that it is basic for him and quite properly so. Followers of Bertrand Russell and Madelyn Murray O'Hare may disagree, but how is that relevant? Must my criteria, or those of the Christian community, conform to their examples? Surely not. The Christian community is responsible to *its* set of examples, not to theirs.³⁹

In his essay "The Foundation of Theism Again: A Rejoinder to Plantinga,"⁴⁰ however, Quinn indicates yet another difficulty with the way Plantinga proceeds in this matter. Quinn points out that in his various writings on Reformed Epistemology, Plantinga does not, in fact, go about establishing epistemic criteria according to the given method. In fact, one of the noticeable things about these writings is that Plantinga nowhere sets out necessary and sufficient conditions for

³⁸ Philip Quinn, "In search of the Foundations of Theism", *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985): p. 473.

³⁹ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p.77.

⁴⁰ In Linda Zagzebski, ed., *Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), pp. 16-21.

a proposition to be properly basic. He does, indeed, assert concerning specific propositions that in certain circumstances they could properly be accepted in a basic way, and concerning other propositions that in certain other circumstances they could not properly be so accepted. These examples, then, would form part of Plantinga's data set for establishing criteria for proper basicity. But he never proceeds to the actual work of constructing such criteria.

However, if theistic belief can be *prima facie* justified by *experience* at all, then there may be less difference between Plantinga and Alston. In the last chapter of this part, I will explore the justificatory resources of religious experience that presented by William Alston in his most influential work, *Perceiving God: The epistemology of Religious Experience*.

3. Alston's Reliabilist Epistemology of Religious Experience

I. Perceiving God

In *Perceiving God*, William Alston argues that we can understand religious experience as kind of perception of God, a non-sensory perceptual experience of God analogous to our sensory perceptual experience of the world. His central thesis is that experiential awareness of God that he calls the "perception of God," can provide epistemic justification for certain kinds of beliefs about God. The putative perception of God yields beliefs to the effect that God is doing something in relation to the subject (e.g., forgiving, loving), or that God has perceivable property (e.g., goodness, power). Alston calls these M-beliefs ("M" for manifestation). These beliefs are "beliefs to the effect that God is doing something currently vis-à-vis the subject - comforting, strengthening, guiding, communicating a message, sustaining the subject in being - or to the effect that God has some (allegedly) perceivable property - goodness, power, lovingness."⁴¹ M-beliefs involve the direct experiential awareness of God. God will be presented to consciousness in much the same way

⁴¹ William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 1.

that objects in the physical environment are presented to consciousness through sensory perception (hereafter SP). The presentation is direct, and thus it is not mediated by the perception of other things or arrived inferentially based on other beliefs.

Alston construes mystical experience as being parallel to sense experience, and uses the term "mystical perception" (hereafter MP) for a putative direct experiential awareness of God.⁴² He takes mystical experiences to involve a *presentation, givenness, or appearance* of something to the subject, identified by the subject as God.⁴³ It is this *presentational* character of the experiences that leads Alston to include them under a general concept of perception. According to the Theory of Appearing, which is his favourite epistemological account of perception, perception just is the awareness of something's appearing to one *as such-and such*, where this "appearing" is a basic.⁴⁴

According to Alston's theory of justification, for a belief to be epistemically justified, it must be *based on an adequate ground*, which could either be experiences or justifiable beliefs.⁴⁵ A belief's ground is adequate if and only if it is a *reliable* indication of the truth of the belief. Consequently, for SP to be a source of justification, it is a

⁴² Alston, *Perceiving God*, p.35.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.37.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-39.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

necessary condition that it be reliable. In the similar way, MP must be reliable if it is to be a source of epistemically justified belief.

II. Doxastic practice approach

Since the central problem of Alston's theory is whether the ways in which people typically form M-beliefs on the basis of their experience yield *prima facie* justified beliefs, and according to reliabilism, a belief is justified only if it is the product of a reliable belief forming process, so actually we are faced with the question of whether the usual ways of forming M-beliefs are sufficiently reliable. For answering the question Alston returns to the epistemology of sense perception, that is, the idea suggests determining whether our typical ways of forming sense perceptual beliefs can be shown to be reliable.⁴⁶

But then do we have any sufficient basis for taking SP and other familiar sources of belief to be reliable and to confer justification? Following the work of Thomas Reid and Ludwig Wittgenstein,⁴⁷ Alston develops the notion of a "doxastic practice", a way of forming beliefs and epistemically evaluating them. But rather than view the formation of such beliefs as an individual, Alston

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.102-106, 143.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.151-155.

emphasizes the formation of such beliefs as a socially established doxastic practice. We find that the formation of most of our beliefs (e.g., introspective, sensory perceptual, memorial, inferential beliefs) is closely related to a range of dispositions to form and hold such beliefs in a wide range of contexts. Alston refers to these dispositions or habits of belief formation as doxastic practices. When such dispositions are socially guided and shared, they are socially established.⁴⁸

Alston argues that considerations of general epistemology lead us to conclude that it is rational to engage in any socially established doxastic practices that we do not have sufficient reasons for regarding as *unreliable*.⁴⁹ In the other word, all socially established doxastic practices must be regarded "innocent until proven guilty." The upshot of Alston religious' epistemology, then, is that the doxastic practice of M-belief formation can form an adequate experiential ground for justified beliefs about God.

Applying the results of Alstonian reliabilism, we looked at the possibility of treating M-belief formation on the basis of mystical perception as a socially established doxastic practice. When we consider the background system of concepts and beliefs that provide

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 158, 173.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p183.

possible *prima facie* justified M-beliefs, we find noticeably different systems in different religions. That forces us to distinguish different forms of MP for the different major religious traditions. Since it would be a colossal task to consider all (or even several) of them, Alston directs his focus on just one particular practice of mystical perception: that of the Christian tradition. He argues that Christian mystical perception (hereafter CMP) does indeed, just as SP, qualify as a full-fledged, socially established doxastic practice. His central thesis "is that CMP is rationally engaged since it is a socially established doxastic practice that is not demonstrably unreliable or otherwise disqualified for rational acceptance."⁵⁰

III. Objection to Alston's Religious Epistemology

A. Projection Theories

Alston recognizes that his view faces certain difficulties. He considers the objection to be expected from those who are critical of religion: might CMP not be unreliable after all? And if there is evidence for its unreliability, would it not be absolutely irrational to engage in CMP? Alston examines various attempts at making this objection stick. For example, following Freud or Marx, one might argue that it is

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

possible to explain religious practices without any appeal to God, and claim that such explanations are preferable to those that do appeal to God. Alston replies that that claim would be false, for such theories “invoke causal mechanisms that themselves pose thus far insoluble problems of identification and measurement: unconscious psychological processes like repression, identification, regression, and mechanisms of defense; social influences on ideology and on belief and attitude formation. It is not surprising that theories like those of Freud, Marx, and Durkheim rest on a slender thread of evidential support and generalize irresponsibly from such evidence as they can muster.”⁵¹

B. Religious Pluralism

In the penultimate chapter of his book Alston examines the other issue that he called “the most difficult problem for my position:”⁵² the problem of *religious diversity*. Alston presents the problem as follows:

Since each form of MP is, to a considerable extent, incompatible with all the others, not more than one such form can be (sufficiently) reliable as a way of forming beliefs about the Ultimate. For if one is reliable, then most of the beliefs that

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.255.

issue from it are true; and hence, because of the incompatibility, a large proportion of the beliefs issuing from each of the others will be false; and so none of those others is a reliable practice. Now why should I suppose that CMP is the one that is reliable (if any are)? No doubt, *within CMP* there are weighty reasons for supposing it to be much more reliable than its rivals; in the practice of CMP we find God telling people things that imply this. It is claimed from within the Christian tradition that God has assured us that His Holy Spirit will guide the church in its decisions, will keep it from error, will provide a "testimony" to the accuracy of the words of Christ, and so on. But, of course, each of the competing traditions can also produce conclusive internal reasons in support of its claims. Hence, if it is to be rational for me to take CMP to be reliable, I will have to have sufficient *independent* reasons for supposing that CMP is reliable, or more reliable or more likely to be reliable, than its alternatives. But no such reasons are forthcoming. Hence, it cannot be rational to engage in CMP; and by the same reasoning it cannot be rational to engage in any other particular form of MP.⁵³

Alston address this problem on a "worst case" scenario, according to which we have no such independent reason. On the basis of various analogies Alston concludes that, though this is not epistemically the best of all possible worlds, it is rational in this situation for one to continue to participate in the (undefeated) practice in which she/he is involved, hoping that the inter-practice contradictions will be sorted out in due time.

Alston begins by inviting us to consider situations in which "different people give conflicting sense perceptual reports [about an

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 268-69.

automobile accident, for example] . . . and in which there is no neutral ground" for resolving the conflict, or to consider various "ways of predicting the weather" where there is "no non-question begging reason for supposing that [one] method is more reliable than the others." In cases like these one has "no sufficient rational basis" for confidence in one's report or in one's method. But there is "a crucial difference" between these cases and the religious situation. In the former, "it is clear what would constitute non-circular grounds for supposing one of the contestants to be superior to the others even if we do not have such grounds." (The accident might have been videotaped. More accurate statistical data could show that one method is more successful than the other.) "It is because the absence of such reasons ... is the absence of something there is a live possibility of one's having, and that one knows how to go about getting, that this lack so clearly has negative epistemic consequences. But precisely this condition is lacking in the religious diversity case." "We have no idea of what non-circular proof of the reliability of CMP would look like, *even if it is as reliable as you please*. Hence why should we take the absence of such a proof to nullify, or even sharply diminish, the justification I have for my Christian M-beliefs?"⁵⁴

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 270-72.

Or consider "the methodological opposition between psychoanalysts and behaviorists." The dispute focuses on whether "clinical 'insight' and 'interpretation'" counts as evidence. "There is no common ground on which the dispute can be resolved." It is not, however, "irrational for the psychoanalyst to continue to form clinical beliefs in the way he does." Similar considerations apply to our continued use of a mystical practice.⁵⁵

Or imagine "a diversity of sense perceptual doxastic practices"-an Aristotelian one in which we see what is visually perceived "as made up of more or less discrete objects scattered about in space," "a Cartesian practice of seeing" it "as an indefinitely extended medium that is more or less concentrated at various points," and a Whiteheadian practice of seeing "the visual field ... as made up of momentary events growing out of each other in a continuous process.... Let's further suppose that each of these practices serves its practitioners equally well in their dealings with the environment." Finally, suppose "that we are as firmly wedded to our 'Aristotelian' form of SP [sense-perceptual practice] as we are in fact." "In such a situation" it is not "irrational" for us to continue to form perceptual beliefs in the way we do. "By parity of reasoning, the rational thing for

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 272-73.

a practitioner of CMP to do is to continue to form Christian M-beliefs” in the way she does.⁵⁶

Consider finally that the very possibility of alternative sense-perceptual practices “gives rise to the same problem.” For there mere “possibility raises the question of why we should suppose that it is rational” to form sense-perceptual beliefs as we do, “given that we have no reason to suppose” that our practice is “more reliable than these other possibilities.” Yet, of course, it is “rational to engage in [our] SP, despite the lack of any non-circular reason for regarding our Aristotelian SP as more reliable than the *possible* alternatives.”⁵⁷ Hence in such a situation “the only rational course for me is to sit tight with the practice of which I am a master and which serves me so well in guiding my activity in the world.”⁵⁸ Alston concludes, therefore, the only rational thing for a CMP practitioner to do is to stick with it and, more generally, to continue to accept and operate in accordance with the Christian belief-system.

Some critics acknowledge that Alston’s defence of CMP is impressive but only partly successful. The second part of this research will be devoted to explore further of the projective explanation of religion and the epistemological challenge of religious pluralism.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 273-74.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Part II

Objections to Reformed Epistemology

In the first part of the present research we examined Reformed Epistemology- the new approach to the rationality of religious beliefs that is currently one of the major interests of analytic philosophy of religion. The Reformed Epistemologist's main claims including the first that theistic belief can be rational without propositional evidence or any support by argument. And the second, that natural theology is unnecessary for the epistemic respectability of religion. These claims have faced to various objections. Within the broad literature on Reformed Epistemology, Philip Quinn in his critical essays talks about "the intellectually sophisticated adult theist in our culture," a person he supposes to "know a good deal about standard objections to belief in God . . . [including] various versions of the problem of evil as well as the tradition of explaining theistic belief projectively that stems from Feuerbach and comes down to us through Freud [, Marx] and Durkheim."⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Philip Quinn, "The Foundations of Theism Again: A Rejoinder to Plantinga," in *Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology*, ed., Linda Zagzebski (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), p. 35.

Quinn concedes that belief in God can have justification that is based directly on experience in the way described by Reformed Epistemologists. But is this justification sufficient by itself to make belief in God rational for well-informed contemporary adults? Quinn believes it is not. Quinn is not denying that such theists have experiences which confer non-inferential justification on their beliefs. But he thinks that, in the typical case, this non-inferential justification will be outweighed by the kinds of objections to theism that are so dominant in contemporary intellectual culture. So if these theists are to be rational in their beliefs, the non-inferential justification of the beliefs through religious experience needs to be supplemented by a broad case for the rationality of theistic belief—that is, by natural theology. In the next sections, following Philip Quinn I will explore these two objections—the problem of evil and projective theories of religion— I will also add “the epistemological challenge of religious pluralism” as a third objections to the Reformed Epistemology.

4. The Problem of Evil

Concerning the problem of evil, Quinn writes, "What I know, partly from experience and partly from testimony, about the amount and variety of non-moral evil in the universe confirms highly for me the proposition expressed by . . .

(28) God does not exist."⁶⁰

This important claim needs a bit more clarifying. While every major worldview, whether religious or secular, addresses the phenomenon of evil, the problem of evil for Theism is very crucial. Since Theism involves such strong claims about the moral character and purposes of God that evil become a particularly perplexing issue. For centuries, philosophers and theologians have recognized that evil constitutes a serious difficulty for religious faith. In fact, many thinkers hold that the problem of evil is the most powerful rational objection to theistic belief, what the German theologian Hans Kung (1923-) has called "the rock of atheism."⁶¹ This section considers the problem of evil as constituting a significant case against the existence of God.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 40. Quinn adds that this claim of his is consistent with (28) being highly disconfirmed by his total evidence. But clearly, additional evidence is needed, to overcome the strong objection to theism based on natural evil.

⁶¹ Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian*, trans. E. Quinn (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), p. 432.

However, we may classify evils into two broad categories, *moral evil and natural evil*.⁶² The category of *moral evil* contains the wrongful and hurtful acts as well as the bad character of free human beings: actions such as murdering, lying, stealing, dishonesty, and greed. The category of *natural evil* covers the physical pain and suffering that result from either impersonal forces or human actions.

I. The Logical Problem of Evil

Many atheist philosophers have made evil the basis of a strong objection to theistic belief. Actually, they have formulated the objection in two different ways, the *logical problem* and the *evidential problem*. Critics who proceed the *logical version* of the problem claim that there is an inconsistency between certain theistic claims about God and evil. John Mackie (1917-1981) writes that "here it can be shown, not that religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational, that the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another."⁶³ On the one hand, the theist affirms that an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good God exists; on the other hand, he affirms that evil exists in the

⁶² See John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (Harper and Row, 1978), p.12; also Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eermands, 1977), p. 30.

⁶³ John Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (1955): 200.

world. The critic, such as Mackie, who proceeds *logical* version of the problem of evil, claims that these two statements are *logically inconsistent* with each other, that they both cannot be true. Since no person is rationally entitled to believe an inconsistent set of statements, the critic charges that it is not rational to believe both. The critic reasons that, if God has the knowledge, power, and desire to eliminate evil, and if evil is not necessary, then evil should not exist. Yet the theist claims that evil does exist. Therefore the supposed inconsistency appears.

No contemporary theistic philosopher has been more energetic than Alvin Plantinga in trying to refute the charge of inconsistency. His refusal, known as the *Free Will Defense*, offers a way of showing the consistency of the relevant theistic claims. Since the critic claims that it is *logically impossible* that both God and evil exist, the theistic defender must show that it is *logically possible*.

Plantinga writes:

A world containing creatures who are sometimes significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. Now God can create free creatures, but he cannot *cause* or *determine* them to do only what is right. For if he does so, then they are not significantly free after all; they do not do what is right *freely*. To create creatures capable of *moral good*, therefore, he must create creatures capable of moral evil; and he cannot leave those creatures *free* to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so. God did in fact create significantly free creatures; but some of them went wrong in the exercise of their freedom: this is the source of

moral evil. The fact that these free creatures sometimes go wrong, however, counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against his goodness; for he could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by excising the possibility of moral good.⁶⁴

Plantinga's claim is that it *is possible* that God would create a world of free creatures who choose to do evil. In other words, for any world God might create, populated by whatever free creatures, it is not within God's power to bring it about that those significantly free creatures never go wrong. And this new statement, together with one asserting the existence of God, implies that evil exists. It can now be seen to be *possible* for both God to exist and for evil to exist. Thus, Plantinga claims the critic's charge-that it *is not possible* for both God and evil to exist-is refuted.

II. The Evidential Problem of Evil

Some critics have developed what is now commonly known as the *evidential problem of evil*, a challenge to theists to adopt their theistic commitments with the facts of evil in the world. The claim here is not that theism is *inconsistent* but that it is *implausible*; the argument rests not on a matter of logic but on the issue of whether

⁶⁴ Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 166-67.

theistic beliefs provide a reasonable explanation of what appear to be the facts of evil. Atheistic philosophers -such as Michael Martin (1932-), William Rowe (1931-), and Wesley Salmon (1925-)- have issued this kind of challenge to the theism.⁶⁵

One form of the evidential argument is proposed by Wesley Salmon. Employing a frequentist interpretation of probability to certain claims about the divine creation and design of the world, Salmon argued that the existence of God is *improbable*. That is, given the existence of evil, it is improbable that God exists. Given the large number of things in our ordinary experience that arise through mechanical production and exhibit order rather than through divine creation, Salmon concludes that the probability of the universe's being caused by mechanical production is high, whereas the probability of its being caused by intelligent design is very low.⁶⁶

Both Nancy Cartwright (1944-) and Alvin Plantinga have replied to Salmon's probabilistic argument. Cartwright accuses Salmon of begging the question by comparing our universe as a whole with particular things within the universe that all arose by mechanical production. And she argues that a statistical or frequentist approach is

⁶⁵ Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), chap. 14; William Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction* (Belmont, Calif: Dickenson: 1978), pp. 86-89; Wesley Salmon, "Religion and Science: A New Look at Hume's *Dialogues*," *Philosophical Studies* 33 (1978): 143-76.

⁶⁶ See Wesley Salmon, "Religion and Science: A New Look at Hume's *Dialogues*," *Philosophical Studies* 33 (1978): 143-76.

completely inappropriate to treating metaphysical issues, such as that of God's existence.⁶⁷

Plantinga's response was intended to show that no sort of probabilistic argument from evil is promising. He argued that there is no existing theory of probability- *logical or frequentist- that can* be used to formulate a formidable argument from evil.⁶⁸ Among the obstacles facing critics are the inherent troubles in modern probability studies in general, as well as the temptation for critics to appeal to their own presuppositions in assessing the probability of the existence of God (e.g., the belief that the universe is a completely natural product without a divine creator). While Plantinga propounds numerous weaknesses in attempts to construct an argument from evil in probabilistic terms, he still leaves unresolved the question of whether there might be a more cogent argument from evil that is evidential in character. In contrast, some atheist philosophers maintain that a formidable *evidential argument* is indeed possible.

However, Plantinga acknowledges that the problem of evil initially seems to present a strong reason for rejecting theism, but he thinks this initial impression is misleading. He notes that atheologists

⁶⁷ Nancy Cartwright, "Comment on Wesley Salmon's Science and Religion," *Philosophical Studies*, 33 (1978): 177-83.

⁶⁸ Alvin Plantinga, "The Probabilistic Argument from Evil," *Philosophical Studies* 35 (1979): 1-53.

have will give up the claim that evil is logically inconsistent with theism. Concerning to this, Plantinga writes: "no atheologian has given a successful or cogent way of working out or developing a probabilistic atheological argument from evil, and I believe there are good reasons for thinking it can't be done."⁶⁹

Philip Quinn in his "The Foundations of Theism Again: A Rejoinder to Plantinga," replies that the failure to construct a successful probabilistic argument from evil shows that evil does not disconfirm theism only if we assume that confirmation must be understood probabilistically, an assumption Quinn rejects. He writes, "I take intuitively clear cases of scientific confirmation and disconfirmation as data against which philosophical accounts of confirmation are to be tested And I am inclined to think that the claim that (28)[God does not exist] is highly confirmed by the non-moral evil in the universe is another such datum for confirmation theory."⁷⁰

For Quinn it seems simply evident that the world's evil disconfirms theism, and the failure of a particular philosophical strategy for showing this (e.g., by arguments based on probability theory) leaves that troubling conviction unaffected. If one sees the

⁶⁹ Plantinga, "The Foundations of Theism: A Reply," *Faith and Philosophy* 3:3 (1986), p. 309. He refers to his own article on the subject: Alvin Plantinga, "The Probabilistic Argument from Evil," *Philosophical Studies* 35 (1979): 1-53.

⁷⁰ Quinn, "The Foundations of Theism Again: A Rejoinder to Plantinga," p. 41.

problem of evil as a group of arguments formulated by atheistic philosophers to make life difficult for theists, then showing that, for technical reasons, these arguments are unsuccessful may be a sufficient response. But if one is deeply troubled and perplexed by the actual phenomena of evil, a purely negative and apologetics strategy may be insufficient. What one needs, in that case, is some positive account of evil, something that offers some actual understanding of why evil exists and how it fits into God's plan for the world. In other words, a theodicy.⁷¹

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.39.

5. Projective Explanations of Religious Belief

Concerning to the projective explanations of religious belief, Quinn writes: "I believe that projection theories have so far achieved a real, but limited, success in explaining religious beliefs of some sorts, and I think this success does give the intellectually sophisticated adult theist in our culture substantial reason for thinking that (28) is true."⁷²

In the following pages I will examine two most influential projective theories, that is, Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx's explanation of religion, which had important contribution to our understanding of religion.

I. Freud's Explanation of Religion

Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939) theory of religion follows a line of thought that developed by Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872). In his controversial study: *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), Feuerbach claimed that all of religion is just a psychological mechanism by which we attach our own hopes, virtues, and ideals to an imaginary supernatural being we call "God" and in the process only diminish ourselves. Feuerbach, might well be called the first modern thinker to

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

offer a purely "projectionist" explanation of religion. That is to say, he explains religion by showing not what truth or rationality believers find in their ideas but rather what is the psychological mechanism that creates religious beliefs, *regardless* of whether they are true or false, rational or irrational.

Following Feuerbach, Freud argues that human religious behaviour is a conscious endeavour; it represents an effort to use reason to understand the world while, at the same time, it demonstrates a failure to reason correctly. Religious people try to be rational but do not succeed; their beliefs and rituals cannot achieve what they suppose.

Through his atheistic upbringing, Freud already knows that religious beliefs do not come from a God, for God does not exist; nor do such beliefs come from the sort of fine thinking about the world that normally leads to truth. He is certain that religious beliefs are erroneous. But, Freud says, we must still try to explain how and why people continued to believe this great collection of superstition and error through history and into the scientific age. Why, if they are so obviously false, do so many people persist in holding these beliefs, and with such deep conviction? If religion is not rational, how do

people acquire it? And why do they keep it? In psychoanalysis Freud claims to have found the answers.⁷³

According to Freud, psychoanalysis tells us that the real and ultimate source of religion's request is not the rational mind but the unconscious. Religion arises from emotions and conflicts that originate early in childhood and lie deep under the rational and normal surface of the personality. It is best seen as an "obsessional neurosis."⁷⁴

In his early writings, Freud claims that there is a close resemblance between the activities of religious people and the behaviours of his neurotic patients. Both, for example, emphasize on doing things in a ceremonial fashion; both also feel guilty unless they follow the rules of their rituals to perfection. In both cases too, the ceremonies are associated with the repression of basic instincts: psychological neuroses usually arise from repression of the sex drive; religion demands repression of selfishness, control of the ego-instinct. Thus, just as sexual repression results in an individual obsessional neurosis, religion, which is practiced widely in the human race, seems to be "a universal obsessional neurosis."⁷⁵ These concepts are fundamental to almost everything Freud wrote on religion.

⁷³ See D.Z. Philips, *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 200-2.

⁷⁴ Michael Palmer, *Freud and Jung on Religion* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 12.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.12-13.

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud maintains if we want to find the origin of religion, we need look no further than the deep psychological tensions. He tried to show that the beginning of religion found in the Oedipus complex, in the powerful emotions that led humanity to its first great crime and then turned a murdered father into a god. In Freud's words, "Totemic religion arose from the filial sense of guilt, in an attempt to allay that feeling and appease the father by deferred obedience to him. All later religions are seen to be attempts at solving the same problem."⁷⁶

The best word we can use to describe religious beliefs, Freud says, is "illusion." For Freud this means something quite specific. An illusion for him is a belief whose main characteristic is that we deeply want it to be true. The God whom people call upon in prayer is not a being who belongs to reality; he is an image, an illusion projected outward from the self and onto the external world out of the deep need to overcome our guilt or allay our fears.

On analogy with the childhood pattern, Freud says, religious belief projects onto the external world, a God, who through his power dispels the terrors of nature, gives us comfort in the face of death, and rewards us for accepting the moral restrictions imposed by

⁷⁶ *Totem and Taboo*, in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Freud Sigmund*. Translated unnder the editorship of James Strachey (London: Hogart Press, 1953), 13: 145. Quote from Palmer, *Freud and Jung on Religion*.

civilization. Religious belief claims that "over each one of us there watches a benevolent providence which . . . will not suffer us to become a plaything of the overmighty and pitiless forces of nature."⁷⁷

Accordingly, religious beliefs are not truths revealed by God, nor are they logical conclusions based on scientifically confirmed evidence. They are, in contrast, ideas whose main feature is that we actually want them to be true. They are "fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes."⁷⁸ The fundamental theme here, therefore, is that religious belief arises from wish-fulfillment.

For Freud, religion beliefs and rules are suitable to the childhood of the human race. In the earlier history of humanity, "the times of its ignorance and intellectual weakness,"⁷⁹ religion was unavoidable, like an episode of neurosis that individuals pass through in their childhood. Religion that continues into the present age of human history can only be a sign of illness; to begin to leave it behind is the first signal of health. Freud writes:

Religion would thus be the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity; like the obsessional neuroses of children, it arose out of the Oedipus Complex, out of the relation to the father. If this

⁷⁷ *The Future of an Illusion*, in Standard Edition, 21: 19.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 21: 30

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 21: 43.

view is right, it is to be supposed that a turning-away from religion is bound to occur with the fatal inevitability of a process of growth, and that we find ourselves at this very juncture in the middle of that phase of development.⁸⁰

Freud concludes it is best "to view religious teachings . . . as neurotic relics, and we may now argue that the time has probably come, as it does in an analytic treatment, for replacing the effects of repression by the results of the rational operation of the intellect."⁸¹ In short, Freud believed, as humanity grows into adult life, it must discard religion and replace it with forms of thought suitable to maturity i.e. science.

The same kind of approach to religion is visible in the writings of Karl Marx, whose views on religion have been a major influence to twentieth century thought.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 21: 44.

II. Marx's Criticism of Religion

Karl Marx (1818-1883) did not begin to develop an explanatory account-what he called a "critique" of religion until the decade of the 1840s, which was the decisive period in his thought, when he read the important writings of Ludwig Feuerbach.

A. Feuerbach: Religion as alienation

Feuerbach's criticism of religious (theistic) belief is related to his interpretation of Hegel and of Hegel's relationship to Christianity. Feuerbach claimed that implication of Hegel's view that the Infinite necessarily pours out its life into the finite in the process of coming to its own self-realization as Spirit (Subject), is the self-projection of Spirit, a "moment" in the life of the Absolute.⁸² If Hegel argues that the world is the self-projection of the Absolute, the truth is that the idea of the Absolute is the projection of the human nature. Thus for Feuerbach, the secret of both speculative philosophy and theology is anthropology properly understood. The knowledge of God is really knowledge of essential human attributes: *theology is anthropology*.

Accordingly, Feuerbach's theory is the idea of God is nothing but the projection of human attributes. The central argument is an

⁸² Van A. Harvey, "Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx", in *Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West*, Eds., Ninian Smart and others (Cambridge University Press, 1985), Vol I, p. 295.

application of the transformative method to Hegel's philosophy of Spirit: if Hegel presented creation and history as the self-alienation of the Absolute, Feuerbach regards the idea of God as a self-alienating "moment" in the process of the human spirit coming to self-consciousness. Since religion is unique to human beings, Feuerbach argues, it is rooted in consciousness.⁸³ The idea of God is simply the idea of the species unconsciously made into an object of thought and treated as separate, heavenly being.

While culture advanced, Feuerbach maintains, the original distinction between God and human became a sophisticated type of theology that overlaid the personalistic conception with more abstract attributes. It creates a deity that has all human perfections and that stands in contrast to mankind's own impoverished condition. "To enrich God, man must become poor; that God may be all, man be nothing."⁸⁴ Just as Hegel's Absolute comes to full self-consciousness and freedom by overcoming its alienated projections, so Feuerbach's humanity can only come to self-conscious freedom by eliminating the objectivity of God.⁸⁵

⁸³ Ludwig Feuerbach, *Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York, 1957), p. 2.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26

⁸⁵ See Van A. Harvey, "Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx," p.298.

When he read these arguments of Feuerbach, Marx found himself completely convinced. In his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction*, Marx followed Feuerbach, "Man, who looked for a superman in the fantastic reality of heaven . . . found nothing there but the *reflexion* of himself." He then adds: "The basis of irreligious criticism is: *Man makes religion*, religion does not make man. In other words, religion is the self-consciousness and the self-feeling of the man who has either not yet found himself, or else (having found himself) has lost himself once more."⁸⁶

Marx greeted Feuerbach's project with enthusiasm, but he did not think that Feuerbach pressed his analysis far enough. He concedes that Feuerbach's criticism of religion is prerequisite of all criticism because Feuerbach established that man makes religion and worships his own heavenly projection. But Marx thinks that Feuerbach still remained an idealist; his emphasis on human consciousness must be radically reformed.

According to Marx, Feuerbach's criticism of religion fails to explore the further implications of this fact that the individual is not an abstract being "squatting outside the world" but a being living within a world of social and political structures which it has created. Marx

⁸⁶ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, introduction," in *On Religion*, ed. Reinhold Niebuhr (California: Scholar's Press, 1964), p. 41.

argues, religion is not an autonomous sphere of human behaviour and belief but reflects a more fundamental social alienation; hence, the only way to deal with it is by means of a critical theory of society as a whole. The State and society produce religion, and if religion is the expression of an unfulfilled existence then the struggle against religion should become a struggle against the world of which religion is the "inverted consciousness." In Marx words: "For Germany *the criticism of religion* is in the main complete, and criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism."⁸⁷ "Feuerbach resolved the religious essence into the *human* essence. But the human essence is not abstraction inherent in each individual. In its reality it is ensemble of the social relations."⁸⁸

However, Marx says that we must notice a parallel between religious and socio-economic activity. Both are marked by alienation. Religion takes qualities -moral ideals- out of our natural human life and gives them, unnaturally, to an imaginary and alien being we call God. Accordingly, Religion is part of the superstructure of society; economic realities form its base. The alienation we see in religion is, in fact, just the *expression* of our more basic unhappiness, which is always economical rather than spiritual. Marx writes:

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁸⁸ Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach" in Marx and Engels, *On Religion*, p. 71.

[...] But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the *world of man*, the state, society. This state, this society, produce religion, a *perverted world consciousness*, because they are a *perverted world*....

Religious distress is at the same time the *expression* of real [economic] distress and the *protest* against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the *opium* of the people.

The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their *real* happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about its condition is the *demand to give up a condition which requires illusions*. The criticism of religion is therefore *in embryo the criticism of the vale of woe*, the *halo* of which is religion.⁸⁹

Finally Marx concludes that religion is pure illusion. It is the most extreme example of ideology, of a belief system whose chief purpose is simply to provide reasons-excuses - for keeping things in society just the way the oppressors like them. Religion's role in history has been to offer a divine justification for the status quo, for life just as we find it.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, introduction," pp. 41-42.

⁹⁰ See Denys Turner, "Religion: Illusions and liberation" in The Cambridge Companion to Marx, (Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 320-337.

III. Plantinga-Quinn debate on projective theories

The challenge between Quinn and Plantinga about projective explanations of religious belief is sharp. Plantinga writes, "Freud's jejune speculations as to the psychological origin of religion and Marx's careless claims about its social role can't sensibly be taken as providing argument or reason for (28), i.e., for the nonexistence of God; so taken they present text-book cases . . . of the genetic fallacy."⁹¹ Quinn admits there are flaws in Freud's writings on this topic, but insists that "to construe Freud's contribution to our understanding of religion as nothing but jejune speculation strikes me as uncharitable in the extreme."⁹² He maintains, "I think both the evidential problem of evil and projective explanations of theistic belief provide substantial reasons for thinking the following defeater of theistic belief is true:

(28) God does not exist."⁹³

However, Plantinga thinks the projection theories (considered as an argument for God's non-existence) commit the genetic fallacy. This assessment may be correct. But what Plantinga ignores is that psychological and sociological projection theories, if they are

⁹¹ Plantinga, "The Foundations of Theism: A Reply," *Faith and Philosophy* 3:3 (1986), p. 308.

⁹² Quinn, "The Foundations of Theism Again: A Rejoinder to Plantinga," p. 42.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

successful, constitute a powerful defeater for the claim that theistic beliefs are non-inferentially justified by religious experience.

That is not to say that the projection theories are in fact successful in discrediting religious beliefs. This is a large topic, and no doubt there is much to be said against such theories, especially when they are taken as a *general explanation* for religious belief and practice. "But," Quinn points out, "I think it is mistake to ignore the explanatory successes of projection theories and the warrant they confer on a potential defeater of theistic belief such as (28). Dismissing the work of projection theorists as a combination of jejune speculation and bad argument would not do justice to their real accomplishments."⁹⁴

Quinn maintains that basic theistic beliefs such as (14) God is speaking to me, (15) God disapproves of what I have done, and (16) God forgive me for what I have done,⁹⁵ have only modest amount of warrant in ordinary condition. While he says, "I am convinced that defeaters of theistic beliefs have a good deal of warrant."⁹⁶ But he emphasizes: "If basic theistic beliefs such as (14)-(16) do not in such circumstances have enough warrant to serve as intrinsic defeater-

⁹⁴ Quinn, "The Foundations of Theism Again: A Rejoinder to Plantinga," p. 43. See also Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 135-163, which contains an extensive discussion of projection theories.

⁹⁵ See the first part of current research, p. 15.

⁹⁶ Quinn, "The Foundations of Theism Again: A Rejoinder to Plantinga," p. 43.

defeaters of all the potential defeaters of theism, natural theology might come to the theistic rescue."⁹⁷

6. The Epistemological Challenge of Religious Pluralism

Needless to say, that in our complex world there are several different "world religions" with mutually incompatible doctrines. But the question is: How does the awareness of religious diversity affect the rationality of belief in God? Although, the problem of religious pluralism – unlike the problem of evil and projection theories- does not necessarily lend support to atheism, but it has considered as constituting an acute case against the exclusivistic perspective of Reformed Epistemology.

One of the best recent treatments of religious diversity in English-speaking world have offered by John Hick (1922_). In this section, I try to spell out this new direction in philosophy of religion namely, Hick's influential argument for religious pluralism. I will argue that Hick's pluralistic hypothesis is a strong objection to the Reformed Epistemology.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

I. John Hick's Philosophy of Religious Pluralism

The problem, Hick was facing, was, how to explain contradicting beliefs of different religions which enjoyed epistemologically equal reasons. And how can one understand apparently equal spiritual and moral fruits that they produced in human life?

Hick's basic claim is that different religions are "different ways of conceiving and experiencing the one ultimate divine Reality."⁹⁸

However, if the various religions are really "responses to a single ultimate transcendent Reality," how then do we account for significant differences between religious traditions? The best explanation is the assumption that "the limitless divine reality has been thought and experienced by different human mentalities forming and formed by different intellectual frameworks and devotional techniques."⁹⁹ Or, as Hick has stated the point elsewhere, the best explanation is the assumption that the different ways of responding to divine reality "owe their differences to the modes of thinking, perceiving and feeling which have developed within the different

⁹⁸ John Hick, "The Philosophy of World Religions," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 37: 229.

⁹⁹ John Hick, "The Theology of Religious Pluralism," *Theology* (1983): 335.

patterns of human existence embodied in the various cultures of the earth." Each "constitutes a valid context of salvation/liberation; but none constitutes the one and only such context."¹⁰⁰

But why accept such a pluralistic explanation? And why choose pluralism as the best religious hypothesis? In other words, why not adopt the exclusivistic assertion that the religious claims of only one perspective are true?

Hick believes we ought not to be exclusivists. He argues when "we start from the phenomenological fact of the various forms of religious experience, and we seek an hypothesis which will make sense of this realm of phenomena" from a religious point of view, "the theory that most naturally suggests itself postulates a divine Reality which is itself limitless, exceeding the scope of human conceptuality and language, but which is humanly thought and experienced in various conditioned and limited ways."¹⁰¹

What is this evidence which makes the pluralistic hypothesis so "considerably more probable" than exclusivism? Concerning to this, Hick tells us, a credible religious hypothesis must account for the fact, "evident to ordinary people (even though not always taken into account by theologians) that in the great majority of cases-say 98 to

¹⁰⁰ Hick, "The Philosophy of World Religions," pp. 229, 231.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

99 percent-the religion in which a person believes and to which he adheres depends upon where he was born."¹⁰²

Moreover, a credible hypothesis must account for the fact that within all of the major religious traditions, "basically the same salvific process is taking place, namely the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness."¹⁰³ And while pluralism "illuminates" these other puzzling facts, the strict exclusivist's view "has come to seem increasingly implausible and unrealistic."¹⁰⁴

But even more importantly, he maintains, a credible religious hypothesis must account for the fact, of which "we have become irreversibly aware in the present century, as the result of anthropological, sociological and psychological studies and the work of philosophy of language, that there is no one universal and invariable" pattern for interpreting human experience, but rather a range of significantly different patterns or conceptual schemes "which have developed within the major cultural streams." And when considered in light of this, Hick concludes, a "pluralistic theory becomes inevitable."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1980), p. 44.

¹⁰³ Hick, "The Philosophy of World Religion," p. 231.

¹⁰⁴ Hick, *God Has Many Names*, p. 49.

¹⁰⁵ Hick, "The Philosophy of World Religion," p. 232.

II. Plantinga Objection to Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis

Alvin Plantinga in his "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism"¹⁰⁶ affirms Christian exclusivism in unqualified terms. His response to religious diversity is the straightforward claim that Christian beliefs are true and all beliefs inconsistent with them therefore false.

Plantinga claims that it is not morally guilty or epistemically violated to adopt an exclusivist attitude. A Christian exclusivist, he says: "violated no intellectual or cognitive duties or obligations in the formation and sustenance of the belief in question."¹⁰⁷ To be a religious exclusivist is, Plantinga argues, neither irrational, unjustified, egotistical, intellectually arrogant, elitist, a manifestation of harmful pride, dishonest, or oppressive and imperialistic.

However, Plantinga criticism of Hick's hypothesis is based on the Reformed Epistemology analysis of belief justification (as we explained in the first part of the present research.) While Hick claims that an inductive assessment of the relevant evidence makes his pluralistic thesis a more plausible religious explanation than any of the competing exclusivistic hypotheses, but Plantinga, as a Reformed

¹⁰⁶ In *The Rationality of Belief and Plurality of Faith: Essay in Honor of William P. Alston*, ed., Thomas D. Senor (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995) pp. 191-216.

¹⁰⁷ Plantinga, "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," P. 202.

exclusivist, argues since evidentialism is incorrect, so this approach to the issue is misguided. Plantinga emphasizes that affirmation of an exclusivistic Christian perspective is not evidential in nature. It is, rather, a "properly basic" belief, which is to say we have simply discovered this exclusivistic hypothesis formed in us in much the same fashion we find our visual and moral beliefs just formed in us.

In order to defend his position, Plantinga does not offer any positive reasons. To undercut defeaters (for example Hick's pluralistic hypotheses), he continues, we need not engage in positive apologetics: produce propositional evidence for our beliefs. We need only engage in *negative* apologetics: refute such arguments.¹⁰⁸ Plantinga maintains Christian exclusivist need not produce "evidence" that would lead most rational people to agree with him: one is not "arrogant and egotistic just by virtue of believing what I know others don't believe, where I can't show them that I am right."¹⁰⁹ Producing propositional evidence that would be to involve himself in Classical Foundationalism, which is increasingly being recognized as a bankrupt epistemological methodology. All he need, Plantinga thinks, do undercut Hick's defeaters -that is- show that his challenge does not require an exclusivist to abandon his exclusivity thesis. Because Hick

¹⁰⁸ Alvin Plantinga, "The Foundation of Theism," p. 313.

¹⁰⁹ Plantinga, "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism, p. 200.

has not demonstrated that exclusivist thesis is self-contradictory. And it is extremely doubtful that there exists any other non-question-begging criterion for plausibility by which he could even demonstrate that exclusivist hypothesis is less plausible or less probable than pluralist hypothesis. And, accordingly, Plantinga concludes, he perfectly justified in continuing to hold that his exclusivity thesis is correct and, therefore, that all incompatible rival hypotheses are false.

It seems clearly that Plantinga response cannot resolve the problem. As Hick rightly points out, the religious belief that the majority of people in any given culture find just formed in them is the dominant hypothesis of that culture or subculture. Moreover, the dominant religious hypotheses in most of these cultures are exclusivistic, that is, incompatible with one another.

However, Hick's analysis of religious diversity challenges Reformed exclusivists to ask why they believe that their religious belief-forming mechanisms are functioning properly while the analogous mechanisms in all others are faulty?

Some Reformed Epistemologists respond: Because of "the fall," most individuals suffer from religious epistemic blindness, that is, they do not possess properly functioning religious belief-forming

mechanisms. Only our mechanisms are reliable.¹¹⁰ But, obviously, every exclusivistic religious tradition can make such claims. Hence, the question again faces Reformed exclusivists: Why do you believe that only those religious belief-forming mechanisms which produce exclusivistic beliefs compatible with yours do not suffer from epistemic blindness? Or to state the question somewhat differently, upon what can Reformed Epistemologists base their crucial belief that their religious belief-forming mechanisms *alone* produce true beliefs?

III. Hick's Critique of Alston's Religious Epistemology

John Hick in his "The Epistemological Challenge of Religious Pluralism,"¹¹¹ greets Alston's idea that the most possible defence of religious belief has to be a defence of the rationality of basing beliefs on religious experience. But he adds immediately:

There is however an obvious challenge to this in the fact that the same epistemological principle establishes the rationality of Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists in holding beliefs that are incompatible with the Christian belief-system. Belief in the reality of Allah, Vishnu, Shiva, and of the non-personal Brahman, Dharmakaya, Tao, seem to be as experientially well based as belief in the reality of the Holy Trinity.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian belief*.

¹¹¹ In John Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp.25-37.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p.25.

Alston himself acknowledges this as "the most difficult problem for my position." Alston's own solution to the problem is that since we have at present no neutral way of establishing which of the world religions is right, and since our own religion is both theoretically and practically satisfactory to us, it is much more reasonable for us to stay with it than to switch to another. On analogy with the rival doxastic practices (Aristotelian, Cartesian, Whiteheadian in terms of which we construe the physical world,) Alston writes:

In the absence of any external reason for supposing that one of the competing practices is more accurate than my own, the only rational course for me is to sit tight with the practice of which I am a master and which serves me so well in guiding my activity in the world... Hence, by parity of reasoning, the rational thing for a practitioner of CP [Christian doxastic practice] to do is to continue to form Christian M-beliefs, [beliefs about God's self-manifestation to us], and, more generally, to continue to accept, and operate in accordance with, the system of Christian belief."¹¹³

As Hick points out, Alston assumed that there is only one "true religion", so that the problematical question is, which of the competing religious belief-systems is the true one? It arises two objections: First, Hick writes:

This widespread assumption is fatal to Alston's thesis that it is rational to base beliefs on religious experience. For if only *one* of the many belief-systems based upon religious experience can be true, it follows that *religious experience generally produces false beliefs*, and that it is thus a generally *unreliable* basis for belief-formation. This is a reversal of the principle, for which Alston

¹¹³ William Alston, *Perceiving God*, p. 274. See also the first part of present research.

has argued so persuasively, that religious experience constitutes as legitimate a ground for belief-formation as does sense experience."¹¹⁴

And the second, Hick argues "whilst it is possible that the doxastic practice of one's own community constitutes the sole exception to a general rule, the claim that this is so can only appear arbitrary and unjustified unless it is supported by good arguments."¹¹⁵

Alston admits the absence of neutral grounds for preferring the Christian world-view as only a "worst case scenario."¹¹⁶ A more desirable scenario would be one in which there are compelling metaphysical arguments for theism and in which in addition "historical evidences give much stronger support to the claims of Christianity than to those of its theistic rivals-Judaism and Islam."¹¹⁷ However Alston does not suggest that this better scenario actually obtains. He says finally, "Perhaps it is only in God's good time that a more thorough insight into the truth behind these divergent perspectives

¹¹⁴ John Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*, p. 26.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* Hick then adds: "The arbitrariness of Alston's position is highlighted when we remember that if he had been born into a devout Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist family he would, using the same epistemology, be equally arbitrarily claiming that his Muslim, or Hindu, or Buddhist beliefs constitute the sole exception to the general rule that religious experience produces false beliefs!"

¹¹⁶ Alston, *Perceiving God*, p.270.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

[i.e. of the different religions] will be revealed to us."¹¹⁸ It is clear that this position is a hope rather than a reality.

Concerning to the last Alston's position, Hick says even if it were a reality it would still undermine Alston's basic principle. He argues based on Alston's only-one-true-religion assumption, the arguments and evidences establishing the truth of Christian beliefs would thereby establish the falsity of the beliefs of other religions that incompatible with Christian beliefs. Hick writes:

And yet religious experience within the different traditions has produced these incompatible beliefs. It thus follows as directly from Alston's best case scenario as from his worst case scenario that religious experience *is not* generally a reliable ground for belief. On the contrary, it follows equally inescapably from either scenario that religious experience generally produces false beliefs, with Christian experience claiming to stand out as the sole exception.¹¹⁹

Thus, the challenge of religious diversity to Alston's experience-based apologetics is clearly acute. Alston, apparently, cannot meet the challenge without a more radical adjustment in his religious epistemology. As mentioned above, Hick acknowledges that Alston's central argument in which religious experience constitutes a valid basis for belief-formation is correct and indeed constitutes the most valuable current contribution to philosophy of religion. Nevertheless Hick says: "would this not be a much stronger

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.278.

¹¹⁹ Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*, p.27.

contribution if the doxastic practices of the other world religions could be seen as further instances of it rather than as contradicting it?"¹²⁰

However, Hick suggests a way to reconcile this two principles:

(a) The principle that we properly form religious beliefs on the basis of religious experience, and (b) that this principle holds impartially for non-Christian as well as for Christian forms of religious experience.

Hick's attempt to reconcile the principles is based on the epistemological principle propounded by St Thomas Aquinas, "Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower,"¹²¹ and Kantian distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal. That is distinction between God/the Ultimate/the Real/the Transcendent in itself and that ultimate reality as variously humanly conceived.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.27.

¹²¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II/II, Q. 1, art. 2. Quote from Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*, p. 28.

Conclusion

Paul Ricoeur in his book, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, tells us, if we want to understand religious concepts we have to choose between two distinct modes of interpreting of religion: "the hermeneutics of recollection" or "the hermeneutics of suspicion."¹²² The hermeneutics of recollection is basically sympathetic to religion because it assumes that the religious believers are in touch with something real and contains, therefore, convinced that its task is to retrieve or to "recollect" a message. The hermeneutics of suspicion, in contrast, denies that there is a divine reality in religion. The conception of it is said to be the product of illusion. Since there is nothing real to "recollect" or to retrieve so the aim of interpretation is to "explain" or to demystify.

However, one can say that "hermeneutics of recollection" aims at achieving a type of faith, which has passed through the fires of criticism. In the first part of this essay, within the hermeneutics of recollection we examined Reformed Epistemology. The main claim of *Reformed Epistemology* is that the theistic belief or the knowledge of God is non-inferential or immediate, psychologically and epistemically.

¹²² Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 28-36.

Immediate knowledge of God has been denied by various epistemological traditions in Western philosophy, from medieval Aristotelianism to Enlightenment empiricism. We examined these traditions by the title of evidentialism. In contrast to the Reformed position, evidentialism requires the possession of adequate evidence for theistic belief to be rational or justified. So evidentialist position maintains that theistic belief is not rational unless it is based on adequate "evidence" (*propositional* evidence.) Given evidentialism, of course, natural theology has an important epistemic function.

This claim comes into harsh challenge from the Reformed Epistemology, the main representatives of which are William Alston, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Alvin Plantinga. Their critique of evidentialism has been closely tied to the defence of the proper basicity of belief in God; the idea that immediate theistic belief can be rational or justified independent of whether there is any evidential case available for theism. Reformed Epistemology, therefore, attempts to show that evidentialism is crucially flawed and that theistic belief could possess certain positive epistemic statuses in the absence of evidence and argument, especially of the sort provided by natural theology.

It is not surprising that many philosophers, including theistic ones, are uncomfortable with this movement. For example, Philip Quinn, a contemporary catholic philosopher, admits that immediate knowledge of God in the way described by Reformed Epistemologists, in particular circumstances, can have justification. But he refutes that this justification is sufficient by itself to make belief in God rational for the intellectually sophisticated adults theists in contemporary culture. He argues that, for most well-informed contemporary theists, there are "defeaters" for theistic belief particularly, the problem of evil and "projective" psychological and sociological explanations of religious belief that outweigh the justification for such belief provided by religious experience.

It also mentioned the epistemological challenge of religious pluralism. Although it does not necessarily lend support to atheism, it seems clear that religious pluralism does to some extent weaken the support of religious experience for any particular system of beliefs about the nature of God or ultimate reality.

However, as we considered, the practitioners of "hermeneutics of suspicion," in contrast to the "hermeneutics of recollection," are basically sceptical about religion. They regard the religious consciousness as a false consciousness; therefore, they do not regard the aim of interpretation to be the retrieval of a message but the

discovery of a hidden meaning lying behind the expressions. In order to explain religion, the most influential practitioners of suspicion have developed what Ricoeur has called "a mediate science of meaning," that is, various kinds of psychological and sociological theories.

There have been many suspicious interpreters of religion in the history of the Western thought, but we pointed out only three of them that called "masters of suspicion": Feuerbach, Marx and Freud. Each of them believed that the religious consciousness should not be taken value because it has been generated by unconscious. At the core of these three suspicious theories of religion is the notion that religion is a "projection," which is to say that God regarded as "objectifications" of some subjective attribute that has been incorrectly taken to be real.

In their assumption, belief in God was an illness: For Marx, religion was "false consciousness," an expression of an estranged social existence. For Freud, religion was a collective neurosis. For Feuerbach, religion is the "alienation" produced when the self makes its own essential nature another objectified being. For all of these atheists, as Ricoeur has observed, their aim was not only to destroy religion, rather, they wanted to "clear the horizon for a more authentic

word, for a new reign of Truth, not only by means of a 'destructive' critique, but by the invention of an art of *interpreting*."¹²³

Ricoeur claims the charitable mode of interpretation is now most systematically practiced by phenomenologists of religion who argue that it is only possible to understand religion by bracketing one's own assumptions and attempting to "get inside" the religious consciousness and to apprehend what it apprehends albeit "in a neutralized mode."¹²⁴ He maintains the interpreter of religion must take the religious consciousness and its object, the sacred, with the utmost seriousness; so much so, that believer must be willing to accept the possibility not only that there is a message imbedded in the symbolic utterances of religion but that this message may even have relevance for the interpreter himself.¹²⁵

Now, what shall we conclude from all this? We have seen that each of the three problems we have considered may well present genuine difficulty for well-informed contemporary theists, and the resolution of these difficulties demand answers going beyond the kinds of responses Reformed Epistemologists have indicated. To be sure, to defeat conclusively the various objections and contribute for the

¹²³ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, P. 33.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, P. 29.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, P. 31.

rationality of theistic belief further answers are needed in the form of natural theology.

These further answers should not limit to eliminate the force of the objections to theism, but should attempt to provide positive argumentative support for belief in the existence of God. I think a consensus, gradually develops in the direction of this point. Many theistic philosophers of religion, at present, call for a broad-based apologetics strategy, one which includes the non-inferential justification of belief by religious experience as well as metaphysical and historical argument and responses to the various potential defeaters of religious belief.

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