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THE CATHOLIC AND THE CALVINIST: A DIALOGUE ON FAITH AND REASON

Gary Gutting

Author's note: Neither of the characters in this dialogue are meant to represent any real person. Both do, on occasion, express views that echo those of Alvin Plantinga; this is particularly so at the beginning of the discussion of proper basicity. Here I have especially relied on Plantinga's paper "The Rationality of Belief in God", in Plantinga and Wolterstorff (eds.), *Faith and Rationality*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1983. Although I do not endorse everything my characters say, their discussion as a whole does present what I regard as some major difficulties for Plantinga's work on the epistemology of religious belief.

Calvinist: I've been very pleased to see how, in recent years, philosophy of religion has shown a new vigor and how Christians have taken a lead in the area. The situation has certainly improved since the days when the discipline was little more than a vehicle for secular assaults on the very idea of religious belief.

Catholic: Things are certainly more lively and more diverse; but, for all the prominence of Christians in the philosophy of religion, I can't say I'm entirely happy with what they've accomplished. There are some important pluses: sophisticated responses to some standard objections to belief, such as Plantinga's version of the free-will defense, extremely searching discussions of proofs of God's existence, and the use of analytic techniques to explicate aspects of the divine nature. But in my view Christian philosophers of religion have failed in their primary duty: to provide positive reasons for believing in the Christian religion.

Cal.: You mean you want to revive the project of rational apologetics? I'm afraid I don't agree. Trying to prove what we believe puts human reason above faith, and that's just another form of idolatry. The Christian who proposes such a project is an unwitting tool of the Enlightenment.

Cath.: I don't see why we should feel so threatened by the idea of subjecting our beliefs to rational scrutiny. If they're true—as we think they are—there's nothing to fear.

Cal.: Of course there's no reason to fear that they'll be shown false by good arguments. And I'm all for the project of refuting the objections put forward by



nonbelievers. But you've admitted yourself that Christian philosophers have done a good job on this.

Cath.: Yes, but that's only negative apologetics. That has an essential place. But I think it's time that Christian philosophers of religion went beyond Plantinga's ploy of supporting their religious beliefs by showing that no one has developed a conclusive argument against them. It's remarkable, don't you think, that, although Christians are a major presence in contemporary philosophy of religion, they haven't produced any positive case for Christianity? Someone who wants to know why Christian philosophers believe will find little or nothing to take seriously. Take Plantinga and D.Z. Phillips, two of the most prominent Christian philosophers of religion. They've both done excellent work in showing the confusions and *non sequiturs* of intellectual attacks on belief, but they give us little idea of why we should believe or why they themselves believe. At the best, they seem to be saying that they've a right to accept their particular version of Christianity as a matter of personal opinion. Certainly, there's little or nothing either says to make someone who doesn't believe uncomfortable in his unbelief. In Plantinga's case, in fact, what he says in defense of believing in God can be just as well used to defend agnosticism or atheism.

Cal. I don't follow you there. Plantinga's never said a word in favor of agnosticism or atheism.

Cath. Of course not. But what does he say in behalf of believing in God? One line (developed in *The Nature of Necessity*) is that "God exists" is rational because it can be derived, via an ontological argument, from the claim that it is possible for a maximally great being to exist. He admits, however, that this latter claim is controversial—not everyone, even among those who have thought seriously about it, accepts it—and that he sees no way of proving it true. Nonetheless, he says he's rationally entitled to accept it, just as he's rationally entitled to accept many other beliefs about controversial philosophical issues, even though he has no cogent reasons for them. Well, maybe he does have a right to his belief as a matter of his personal opinion. And then he's entitled to draw the conclusion, from his ontological argument, that God exists. But, by the same token, an atheist who finds the idea of a maximally great being impossible is rationally entitled to believe that God (in the sense of a maximally great being) doesn't exist. In fact, if challenged, he could just follow Plantinga's line of argument to show that his disbelief is rational. Plantinga is just as much an apologist for atheism as he is for theism. To put it another way, there's a weak sense of rationality in which a belief's being rational is consistent with the belief's denial also being rational. Plantinga perhaps shows that his religious belief is rational in this sense. But there's a stronger sense of rationality in which a belief's being rational entails that its denial is not rational. Plantinga has not shown that belief in God is rational in this sense.

Cal. Plantinga's only goal is to answer critics who say believers have no right to their belief. In your terms, this is a project of negative apologetics; and for such a project it's sufficient to show that belief in God is, as you might say, "weakly rational". But showing that belief in God is strongly rational—the project of positive apologetics—is an inappropriate grounding of faith in reason.

Cath. You keep saying that positive apologetics is wrong-headed. But what of the long tradition it has within the Christian church? Augustine's *City of God* was written to argue for the superiority of Christianity to its pagan rivals, to, as he said, "persuade the proud how great is the virtue of humility". Thomas Aquinas wrote his *Summa contra Gentiles* to argue for the truth of the Catholic faith against Jewish and Moslem nonbelievers....

Cal. Well, the Middle Ages did tend to an excess of rationalism—that's one of the errors the Reformers had to correct.

Cath. But even after the Reformation and among Christians who put a very strong emphasis on the limits of reason and the need for grace, we find the tradition of positive apologetics strong. Think of Pascal, with the elaborate scheme for his *Apology* or Schleiermacher's *Speeches on Religion to Its Cultured Despisers*, specifically designed to convince romantic pagans of the intellectual credibility of Christianity. From the days of the Fathers on, there has been a series of major Christian thinkers who have been strikingly successful in making a case for Christianity to nonbelieving intellectuals. Pascal made even Voltaire feel uncomfortable at his "shadow across the path" to a rejection of Christianity. But contemporary nonbelievers can read the very best current Christian philosophers (and theologians too, but that's another matter) and feel entirely unchallenged in their nonbelief. At most, they'll be more cautious in condemning Christians for believing.

Cal. There may be a Christian tradition of positive apologetics, but I can't see how it is consistent with the essential Christian doctrine that faith is a gift of God, not a human discovery.

Cath. Of course faith is a gift of God, but why shouldn't we expect that here, as elsewhere, God will act through creaturely instruments? Children are a gift of God too, but we can't expect them to arrive without any human effort.

Cal. You're confusing natural goods like children with supernatural goods like faith. The former are gifts of God in the sense that they are products of the natural order of things established by God's providence. The latter are results of God's direct intervention in our lives. That's why faith, as a supernatural gift, can't be the result of human work.

Cath. Well, I don't want to get into another furious and fruitless dispute about faith and works. But no matter what your view on the theology of grace, you surely must admit that human factors are almost always somehow involved in people's coming to believe. Those born Christian are taught religious doctrines

and practices by their parents. Converts are impressed by the lives of believers, by the relevance of the Christian worldview to their personal problems, sometimes even (as in the case of Graham Greene) by metaphysical arguments for God's existence.

Cal. All such factors may well be mere occasions for the operation of divine grace. They may have absolutely nothing to do with the actual production of faith in the believer.

Cath. Granted. But, at the very least, you have to admit that some occasions are more favorable—perhaps through God's choice—than others for the operation of grace. People are more likely to believe after they've seen heroic virtue among Christians than they are after seeing indifference or cowardice. Similarly, they're more likely to believe after hearing arguments that make a good case for the truth of Christianity than they are after hearing a plausible case for rejecting it as superstitious nonsense. Surely if we think of our positive apologetics as merely preparing the way for the Lord, with no pretension to doing the work of grace, there is no reason to condemn it.

Cal. Perhaps not. I agree that in general human works can be more or less suitable occasions for the workings of grace. But I'm not convinced that intellectual argument—in contrast, for example, to training by parents or the influence of moral example—are significant occasions for the operation of grace. The abstractness and complexity of arguments about religious issues seem more likely to occasion doubt and indifference than faith. Besides, most people don't put that much weight on intellectual considerations.

Cath. It depends on what sort of intellectual considerations you're talking about. Contemporary discussions of causal and ontological proofs of God's existence surely suggest that these arguments are too complex and questionable to provide most people with any significant support for belief. But that doesn't mean there aren't other lines of argument that may turn out to be more direct and compelling—perhaps ones based on religious and moral experience. Many believers reject traditional theistic proofs as irrelevant to their belief and say it's a matter of faith rather than reason. But, at the same time, they don't think of their belief as having no basis at all, as being a gratuitous, groundless conviction. There are certain experiences or intuitions that they see as entirely justifying—even requiring—their belief. Perhaps bases of this sort aren't expressed in the ordinary apologetic proofs; maybe they don't even fit the conception of a proof that is drawn from the traditional proofs. But that just shows that we need to revise our notion of what a proof is. In everyday life, we believe with full justification many things that can't be grounded the way that a mathematical theorem or a well-confirmed scientific theory is. If our model of proof is taken from mathematics or science, then of course we will say we don't have proof that Paris is the capital of France or that our fathers are our mothers' husbands. But there are

still good reasons for such beliefs; they have their justification. Why shouldn't the same be true of religion?

Cal. There's something to what you say, but I still don't believe it's appropriate to speak of proof and argument in this connection. Having a proof or argument means that the belief is inferred from other beliefs. I don't think religious belief is like that. Of course, some religious beliefs are inferred from others. But perhaps Plantinga is right in his suggestion that our fundamental religious beliefs—e.g., that God made the world, that God forgives our sins—are properly basic beliefs. That is, we're entitled to hold them even though they're not supported by any other beliefs.

Cath. But then why are you entitled to them? Of course, I agree that not all beliefs need or can be derived from others. Argument must start somewhere. But we can't just arbitrarily choose our starting-points. We're entitled to take a claim as basic only if it has some privileged epistemic status—if, for example, it's self-evident or incorrigible. Otherwise, a person could take any silly view at all and say it's basic for him. But what special status do religious beliefs have? They're surely not self-evident, like basic mathematical truths, or incorrigible, like first-person reports of sense impressions.

Cal. Of course not. But what says that only what's self-evident or incorrigible can be properly basic?

Cath. Nothing. But what says that "God exists" is properly basic? What criterion for proper basicity do you have that will let "God exists" be properly basic and still exclude things that are obviously not properly basic? "God exists" is a claim that there is a very powerful being that we don't encounter in our ordinary sense experience. Many people make similar claims about the existence of demons, angels, even extraterrestrial intelligences. If "God exists" can be properly basic, why can't these claims too?

Cal. I don't see that I'm required to offer a criterion of proper basicity that will allow "God exists" and exclude the other claims. After all, how would we arrive at such a criterion in the first place? Surely, it would be by an inductive process that would begin with some clear cases of beliefs that are properly basic and some clear cases of beliefs that aren't. Then we'd evaluate proposed criteria of proper basicity by seeing how well they fit the clear cases.

Cath. I should think you would also begin with some obvious conditions for proper basicity; for example, self-evidence as a sufficient condition, apparent noncontradiction as a necessary condition. These could be used to evaluate proposed examples of proper basicity.

Cal. Agreed. To give an account of proper basicity we need to move back and forth between clear cases of beliefs that are properly basic and clear cases of conditions of proper basicity. It's the same sort of procedure Goodman, Chisholm, and Rawls have employed to elucidate other philosophical issues.

The point here, however, is that the procedure allows—indeed requires—clear cases of proper basicity that don't need to be shown to be such by appeal to criteria of proper basicity. Accordingly, we can take "God exists" as one of our clear cases of proper basicity.

Cath. What astonishing chutzpah! How can a believer just blithely claim that it's utterly obvious that he's entitled to believe without having any reasons for his belief? What of the fact that there are all sorts of honest and intelligent people who've thought a lot about religious belief and simply don't see belief in God as properly basic? This would include lots of believers—for example, Thomas Aquinas. Some would even say that belief in God is a clear case of a belief that is not properly basic. When there's so much responsible dissension, how can you say belief in God is obviously properly basic?

Cal. I don't see the problem. Why should I have to worry what other people think of the matter? Of course agnostics such as Bertrand Russell, atheists such as Jean-Paul Sartre and, as you say, even theists such as Thomas Aquinas will disagree on the proper basicity of belief in God. But why should that matter? I need only worry about my own clear cases of proper basicity.

Cath. I can't believe you really mean that—at least if you're still talking about developing a philosophical account of proper basicity. As philosophers we surely have to take as clear cases only those that would be admitted as such by just about any rational person. Suppose, for example, a dog-loving moral philosopher thinks it's utterly obvious that killing a rabid dog loose on a playground full of children is a clear case of a morally wrong action. Surely, it's not appropriate for him to develop an account of morality on the basis of this example. It may be a clear case for him, but it's not for the community of moral philosophers.

Cal. Of course, when you're engaged in discussions with others, what you propose as a clear case has to be one your interlocutors will agree with. What's obvious among one group will not be obvious among another. But I'm not concerned with what the believer is entitled to take for granted when he's trying to convince other people. That will depend on those other people and what they believe. To that extent, my comparison with inductive philosophical methods was not entirely appropriate. Here I'm concerned only with what the believer is entitled to take for granted as properly basic when he's grappling with the question of what *he* should think about proper basicity. It's a question of what's appropriate as a starting-point for him, not for the community of philosophers or of all rational inquirers, or whatever. What "we" are entitled to take for granted as starting-points in our discussion will vary with who "we" are and will be, in each case, the intersection of the starting-points of each individual in the group. But when it's a question of what I as an individual am entitled to take as properly basic, then all that matters is what I see as clear cases of proper basicity. So

if a believer sees belief in God as obviously properly basic, he has every right to take it as such.

Cath. That's of course right from a subjective viewpoint. It's just like the case of moral obligation. If it really does seem to me that killing a dog is always morally wrong, then obviously I should never kill a dog. That's my subjective duty. But we can still raise the question of whether I've made a correct assessment of my moral obligation. That is, given that subjectively I ought to do what I think I ought to do, we can still ask if what I think I ought to do is what I objectively—apart from what I think—ought to do. Similarly, even if we grant that someone who really thinks belief in God is properly basic for him has every right to take it as such, we can still ask: Is this person objectively right in thinking that belief in God is properly basic for him?

Cal. Agreed. But surely many believers are objectively right in taking belief in God as properly basic.

Cath. How so?

Cal. Because the conditions under which they hold their beliefs are the sort that entitle them to them as properly basic.

Cath. I'm not sure what sort of conditions you have in mind. If you're talking about reasons for thinking the belief is true, then you're not talking about basic beliefs.

Cal. Of course. But I'm not talking about *reasons* for a belief but rather about what we might call its *grounds*.

Cath. I'm not sure I get the distinction.

Cal. Basic beliefs, by definition, do not have reasons; that is, they aren't derived—deductively or inductively—from other beliefs. But we aren't entitled to just any such belief. Take a perceptual case, say the belief that the sky is now blue. Whether or not this belief is properly basic depends on the circumstances in which it's held. If I hold it as a result of my being outside and seeing, when I look up, a clear, blue expanse, then (other things being equal) it's properly basic. If, on the other hand, I've been trapped in a mine for several days with no opportunity to look at the sky but nonetheless happen to find myself thinking, inexplicably but with great conviction, that the sky outside is a cloudless blue, then my belief is basic but not properly so. The difference is in the conditions in which the belief arises or continues to exist. A belief is properly basic only if appropriate conditions obtain. We can call such conditions the grounds for the belief and distinguish beliefs that are properly basic from those that aren't in virtue of the fact that the former but not the latter have adequate grounds.

Cath. It seems to me that your "grounds" reduce to reasons, so that beliefs that have grounds can't be basic. Take your example of the belief that the sky is now blue. You say the grounds of the belief include such conditions as its seeming to me that the sky is now blue, my being outside and looking up, etc.

But surely, if we state all the relevant conditions, they would constitute an argument for the conclusion that the sky is now blue. And, if the grounds in question are my grounds for my belief, doesn't this mean that I in fact hold the belief because of the argument corresponding to the grounds, so that the belief is not really basic?

Cal. Not at all. I'm afraid you've totally misunderstood my point. First of all, a statement of the grounds for a basic belief will not in general constitute a good argument for the truth of the belief. In the perceptual case, for example, such an argument would face the insuperable difficulties encountered by efforts to derive physical object statements (e.g., "There is a red cube in front of me") from sense data reports (e.g., "I seem to see a red cube in front of me"). Secondly, even if there were such good arguments, it would still be false to say that they provide reasons for those who hold the beliefs in question. In the proper conditions, I directly see that the sky is blue. I don't infer it from statements of the conditions I'm in—even if the inference would be a good one.

Cath. I have an idea of what the conditions you're talking about are for perceptual cases, but what sort of conditions are relevant to the proper basicity of a religious belief?

Cal. I don't have anything esoteric in mind. It's just a question of the sorts of experiences believers have all the time in the course of their religious lives. When they're young, their belief arises from the religious training and instruction they get at home and at church. It seems to me that a child who is continually told about God by parents and other teachers he loves and respects has every right to believe in God. Not that he's inferring God's existence from the reliability of their teaching; he's not sophisticated enough for any such thing. But the ordinary religious training Christian children often receive is an entirely adequate condition for the proper basicity of their beliefs. Here belief in Christianity is on a par with lots of other beliefs about what there is (e.g., distant places and times) and what we ought to do that children learn from their parents.

Cath. That may be all right for the very young, but eventually a person learns that his parents aren't always right and that there are lots of people—apparently as reliable as his parents—who don't share their religious beliefs. He realizes too that he could have received a different sort of upbringing that would have led to his having entirely different religious beliefs, or even none at all. Surely all this calls the proper basicity of religious belief into question.

Cal. Of course. But, as a person matures religiously, there are new conditions of proper basicity that become relevant. The religious life leads us to experiences of the world and of ourselves that provide more direct and personal sustenance of religious beliefs.

Cath. I'm not entirely clear what you have in mind.

Cal. Again, nothing esoteric. The believer sees, for example, the beauty of the

world around him and this strengthens his beliefs in God as its Creator. Or he has an experience of guilt for his sins that he sees as due to God's judgment of him. Sometimes it's just a matter of feeling God's presence while at prayer. But in no case is it a matter of an inference to God's existence from premises about the world's beauty, the reality of guilt, etc. It's just that the conditions of experiencing these sorts of things are appropriate for the formation of a properly basic belief.

Cath. On your account then the grounds of a belief don't provide reasons for it because there's in general no sound argument from statements of the ground to the belief. the believer who believes in God as creator when he sees the world's beauty is not relying on a teleological argument. But it seems to me that there still must be a good argument—deductive or inductive—from statements of the grounds to the conclusion that the belief is properly basic. How else can the conditions that are the grounds of a person's belief be sufficient for his taking the belief as properly basic? Accordingly, even though I have no reasons for a belief that is properly basic, I must have reasons for the claim that the belief is properly basic.

Cal. I agree that it follows from the meaning of "conditions of proper basicity" that there is a good argument that has statements of the conditions as premises and the claim that the belief in question is properly basic as its conclusion. But it doesn't follow that this argument is a person's reason for taking his belief as basic.

Cath. Why not?

Cal. Because, typically, a person who properly takes a belief as basic won't even be aware of what the conditions in which he does so are and so, *a fortiori*, won't know about any argument from statements of them to the proper basicity of his belief. Even in simple perceptual cases, hardly any of us can, even after reflection, state all the relevant conditions for proper basicity. That's a complex philosophical task that hardly anyone has carried out for any perceptual belief.

Cath. Still, if enough questions arise about the proper basicity of a belief, there would be reason for those holding it to begin reflecting on the adequacy of the conditions under which they hold it. If the sky seems blue to some but not to other competent observers, then we need to pay some explicit attention to the conditions of our experience. But let that point pass for a moment. I'd like to return to our original question of whether there's a place for positive apologetics. Even if the believer doesn't need to formulate the arguments for the proper basicity of his belief in order to be justified in holding it, why couldn't he present such arguments to convince nonbelievers? If, for example, there is a good argument from experiences of the world's beauty and other relevant conditions to the proper basicity of belief in a Creator, why couldn't believers use such arguments to convince nonbelievers?

Cal. I see two problems with such a project. First, what reason do we have to think that nonbelievers are in the same conditions as believers? Do they experience the world's beauty or their own sinfulness in the same way believers do? If not, they won't accept the premises of our arguments. Second, the arguments we've been talking about conclude to only the *right* of a person to believe; they don't say he should or must believe. So even if the arguments were successful, the nonbeliever could still properly refuse to believe.

Cath. I think you're giving too weak a construal of the Christian's attitude toward his belief. To begin with your second point: It's natural for the believer whose faith has been challenged to respond that he has every right to believe, and it is just in this spirit that Plantinga suggests that religious belief is properly basic. But surely, from his own point of view, the believer doesn't see the tenets of his faith as something he can take of leave, something he can believe if he's so disposed but needn't if he's not. Surely the believer sees himself as obliged to believe. Accordingly, he must see the grounds of his belief as not only permitting but requiring belief.

Cal. I suppose so. But what has that to do with the nonbeliever?

Cath. It means that the argument for taking belief in God as properly basic that the believer derives from his own experiences will conclude to an obligation, not just a right, to believe.

Cal. All right. But that brings us back to my first difficulty. Why think that the nonbeliever will accept the premises of the believer's arguments?

Cath. First, because the conditions from which the premises derive are experiences that nonbelievers share with believers. As Hume and Kant emphasize, almost everyone experiences the order and beauty of nature as crying out for a designer. Similarly, who hasn't felt a guilt for evil actions beyond mere sorrow for the bad consequences they have had? Twentieth-century literature shows that a profound sense of guilt haunts even those who acknowledge no God. Further, the Christian religion itself tells us that the grounds for belief are available to nonbelievers. Surely that is the point of the famous text from Romans: "Ever since God created the world his everlasting power and deity—however invisible—have been there for the mind to see in the things he has made" (1:18). Likewise, Thomas Aquinas says: "the divine Wisdom itself...reveals its own presence, as well as the truth of its teaching and inspiration, by fitting argument".¹ Even your own Calvinist tradition, while rejecting the idea of arguments for the truth of what is believed, insists that the conditions for directly seeing that God exists are present for all men. Thus Calvin himself says: "To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretence of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty....men one and all perceive that there is a God and that he is their maker."²

Cal. It doesn't follow though that arguments of the sort we're talking about will

in fact convince nonbelievers. Hardness of heart may still—as Calvin suggests—make them blind to what should be apparent.

Cath. Of course, even good arguments may fail to produce belief. There's always a free choice involved in a mature faith. But at least the believer can be assured that the weight of rational considerations is clearly on the side of belief and that those who persist in nonbelief are objectively irrational in doing so.

Cal. I'm certainly not adverse to the idea that it's nonbelievers rather than believers who are at an intellectual disadvantage. However, I'm worried that the account of the grounds of belief that we've been working with might have unacceptable consequences for the nature of faith. I know I, following Plantinga, proposed the account; and I agree that, given the account, there does seem to be a place for positive apologetics. But now I'm beginning to wonder if our talk of religious belief as having a ground that rationally justifies it is really consistent with a proper understanding of what it is to believe.

Cath. I don't see why.

Cal. Well, I'm thinking of why I and others have resisted the idea—to which you Catholics have often been inclined—that religious beliefs need to be justified by arguments. Quite apart from the question of whether or not such arguments can be given in principle, it seems quite clear that few ordinary believers have access to arguments adequate to justify their belief. Metaphysical or moral proofs of God's existence, historical cases for the reliability of Scripture, the appeal to miracles as support for the Church's authority—all such arguments have in fact led to complex, controversial issues that can be resolved, if at all, only by highly technical discussions among those specially trained in philosophy, history, philology, etc. No ordinary believer—that is, one untrained in these areas—can hope to form an authoritative opinion of his own on such issues. Further, even someone with expert competences in the disciplines relevant to evaluating the philosophical and historical claims needed to justify religious belief could hardly find any argument he developed strong enough to support more than a very tentative faith. In matters so complex and controversial, how much confidence could he have in even his most carefully arrived at conclusions? At the very least, he would have to be always open to the very real possibility that new evidence or arguments would someday refute his arguments and require him to give up his belief. In short, even if justifying arguments for belief do exist in principle, they are far too weak a basis for a robust and enduring faith.

Cath. Perhaps so. But the view we've been working with doesn't make belief dependent on argument; it takes fundamental religious claims as properly basic.

Cal. Yes, but we've also said that there must be arguments from premises expressing the conditions under which such beliefs are properly basic to the conclusion that they are properly basic.

Cath. But, as you yourself pointed out, someone who takes a belief as properly

basic need not provide or even be aware of this argument. It's enough that the argument in fact exist.

Cal. That's true for some very straightforward cases of properly basic belief, such as believing there's a tree in front of me when I see it. But, as *you* mentioned earlier, if serious questions arise about the proper basicity of my belief, then I do need to inquire into the reasons for thinking that it is properly basic. Specifically, it seems to me that if I see a good *prima facie* case for thinking that a belief is wrong, then I can't just keep holding to it as properly basic without reflecting on the grounds of its proper basicity. Even in the straightforward perceptual case, for example, if I find that other apparently normal perceivers don't see a tree where I do or if I have reason to think I'm prone to hallucinations, then I have to look at the grounds of my belief before I can properly take it as basic.

Cath. I'm not sure that's always the case. What about someone who encounters—while, say, reading Descartes' First Meditation—what seem to him good *prima facie* reasons for doubting the existence of material objects and other minds? Perhaps he finds the deceiving God hypothesis plausible and doesn't really see how to get around its apparent skeptical implications. But surely he's not required to suspend judgment on the existence of material objects and other minds until he's convinced himself that he does have good grounds for taking these beliefs as properly basic (or that he can derive them from other properly basic beliefs).

Cal. Probably not. But isn't that because there's no real question of his actually giving up these beliefs? It would be impossible for most of us to stop believing that things other than ourselves exist. As Hume said, skeptical arguments are unanswerable but unconvincing. Even for the occasional individual who might actually come to genuinely doubt or deny the existence of material things and other minds, it's hard to see how—unless he's psychotic—this loss of belief would have any significant effect on his day-to-day behavior. In almost all circumstances, he would continue to act as if the things he did not believe in did exist.

Cath. So your suggestion is that we aren't—at least in any practically significant sense—able to give up belief in an external world or in other minds, so there's no obligation to give them up? Can't implies needn't?

Cal. Exactly. Religious belief, by contrast, surely can be given up. Christianity in fact sees doubt and denial as constant threats against which the believer must guard. So if a believer thinks there's *prima facie* reason to think Christian beliefs are wrong and giving them up is a real possibility for him, then it seems to me that the believer needs to have reasons for thinking that his belief is properly basic.

Cath. I can see that any Christian who isn't entirely isolated will have encountered some *prima facie* reasons for thinking his beliefs are wrong. He'll be aware of atheistic objections such as the problem of evil and maybe even questions about the internal consistency of the concept of God (how can he be both all just and

all merciful, how can he act and yet be unchangeable?) He'll also be aware of apparently plausible explanations of religious belief in Marxist and Freudian terms that suggest it's an illusion. And, finally, he'll realize that there are large numbers of apparently honest, intelligent, and religiously sensitive people who think the main claims of his religion are false (e.g., those who accept non-Christian religions). All of this gives him *prima facie* reason for thinking his belief is wrong. But why should this be a difficulty? Presumably the mature believer is able to see that, for all their superficial plausibility, these difficulties aren't insuperable. And once the difficulties are neutralized, the believer is entitled to continue holding his beliefs as basic, without explicitly examining their grounds.

Cal. I'm not so sure the objections can be neutralized as easily as you suggest. It seems to me that an adequate evaluation of the important objections to Christian belief leads to the same sort of complex and controversial issues that the development of a positive apologetics does. Take the problem of evil. Almost any believer sees the *prima facie* problem this poses for the existence of God. So properly to maintain his belief in God as basic, he needs to show that the existence of evil doesn't really make the existence of an all-good, all-powerful God impossible or improbable. The problem of evil is what epistemologists call a *prima facie* defeater of theistic belief. Accordingly, as Plantinga says, "if the believer is to remain justified, something further is called for—something that *prima facie* defeats the defeaters."³ Now the problem is that most ordinary believers—those without special philosophical or other technical abilities and training—are simply not able to defeat *prima facie* defeaters of their beliefs, such as the problem of evil. They know perfectly well that they can't show what's wrong with the objections of sophisticated nonbelievers.

Cath. Probably not. But why can't they rely on the efforts of sophisticated believers? For example, even a bright undergraduate will probably not be able to criticize effectively the argument from evil as his philosophy instructor has formulated it. But isn't it enough for him to know that this sort of argument has been effectively criticized by Christian philosophers? I'm not suggesting that he would even be capable of understanding, say, Plantinga's version of the free-will defense. But can't he at least rely on Plantinga's authority here?

Cal. He could if he had reason to believe that Plantinga—or other Christian apologists—are reliable authorities. But what basis does he have for thinking this? Given that he can't evaluate the work himself, he can rely only on the judgment of those qualified to do so. But there's clearly no consensus among philosophers—even Christian philosophers—about the effectiveness of the free-will defense and other defenses of Christian belief. Besides, what sort of faith would it be that had to depend for its assent on a consensus of philosophers? Such a thing hardly ever exists and, if it does, is unlikely to endure.

Cath. Well, then, why can't the believer justify his beliefs directly by an appeal

to the grounds of their proper basicity? I recall that, regarding the problem of evil, Thomas Aquinas says that, quite apart from any attempts to explain evil religiously or directly prove its existence compatible with God's, we know that the fact of evil doesn't call our belief in God into question because we have independent reasons for thinking God exists. Similarly, our believer may not have reasons, but he can appeal to the grounds of his properly basic belief in God. With this belief independently sustained, he can rightly say that there are ways of showing objections to belief wrong, even if he doesn't know precisely what they are.

Cal. But what makes you think the independent justification of belief can be given? I doubt that the ordinary believer can explicate the grounds of his belief in God and show them to support its proper basicity any more than he can develop defeaters of the *prima facie* defeaters of his belief. In fact, by suggesting that the believer must proceed in this way, you're in effect saying what critics of religion have typically said: that believers have no right to believe unless they have good arguments for this right. The account of the grounds of belief we've been working with was designed to justify belief without such arguments—which, to be honest, few if any ordinary believers have. Now you're saying that argument is necessary after all.

Cath. At least it's a different kind of argument. The typical demand has been that the believer produce reasons for the truth of what he believes. On the present approach, he need only give an argument for the appropriateness of belief in the relevant conditions. For example, he doesn't have to provide a teleological argument for God's existence; he need only show that someone experiencing the beauty and order of the world is rightly led to believe in God as its creator.

Cal. I see that the form of the argument is different, but I don't see that it's any less difficult to derive the conclusion from the premises. In fact, the most obvious approach would be one that just collapses back into the teleological argument; namely, to say that, given experiences of beauty and order, it's appropriate to believe in god simply because the world's beauty and order make it likely that it was designed by God. Frankly, I'm not at all clear as to what other viable way there is of showing how experiences of beauty and order ground belief in God. Similarly, I suspect that appeals to grounds such as experience of guilt or of a divine presence will turn into arguments from conscience or from religious experience. Certainly Plantinga, who suggests the idea of grounds for properly basic beliefs, gives us almost no idea of what the arguments corresponding to these grounds would look like.

Cath. I see that the believer is in trouble if he has to make explicit a cogent argument that expresses the grounds of his belief. I can imagine that he might do this for some minimal belief in God—arguing, for example, from his experience of a good and powerful being concerned about him. But it seems very

unlikely that he could similarly support his further beliefs in doctrines about the specific nature of God (e.g., omniscience and omnipotence) or the specific nature of his revelation to man (e.g., the divine inspiration of the Bible). Under what sort of conditions is it allowed or required to believe that there is an omnipotent being or that a given book is divinely inspired? I can see the condition of being told so by one's elders as appropriate for a child, but I really can't come up with any appropriate conditions for the mature believer. I'm not denying that there are such conditions. I'm just saying I don't think it's at all likely that most believers could give anything like an adequate statement of them.

Cal. But isn't that just what the believer must do to justify his faith in the face of *prima facie* defeaters that he isn't able to defeat?

Cath. Well, perhaps we were too hasty in agreeing that the ordinary believer can't defeat the *prima facie* defeaters of his belief. We assumed that to do so he would have to discover some specific flaw in the *prima facie* defeater—a faulty inference or a dubious premise. Now I agree that most believers can't do this for the more sophisticated sort of defeaters. But is it right to demand so much? Perhaps it's enough if the believer has good reason to think that there is some flaw or another in the defeater, even if he can't specify exactly what it is.

Cal. I don't quite see how the believer can have good reason for thinking an argument has a flaw and yet not be able to say what the flaw is. If he thinks the argument is invalid, he must have some idea where the invalidity lies; if he thinks a premise is false, he must have some idea which one. Of course, you can rightly believe that an argument is flawed on the authority of others without knowing where the flaw is. But we've already seen that here there is no consensus of authorities for the believer to rely on.

Cath. You're assuming that to defeat a defeater the believer needs good reason to think that the apparently defeating argument is either invalid or unsound. But surely that's too strong a requirement. An apparently defeating argument can be disarmed even if we don't have good reason to think it's invalid or unsound. It's enough to show that it's not obviously valid or not obviously sound. In replying to a *prima facie* defeater of his belief, the believer need not show that a particular premise is probably false or a particular inference probably fallacious. He need only show that he need not accept the premise or inference in question. Take an example from Plantinga's discussion of the problem of evil. In trying to extend the free-will defense to natural evil, he suggests that all natural evil may be due to the Devil. He says this because, given the adequacy of the free-will defense for moral evil, it is clear that a case against God's existence based on natural evil requires the premise that some natural evil is not due to the action of a finite free agent. Plantinga is in no position to show that this is false or even improbable. But he can point out that it's not obviously true, that there are alternatives—such as the Satanic hypothesis—that seem equally reasonable. So,

as I said, we can defeat a defeater just by showing that its premises are not obviously true or its inferences not obviously valid.

Cal. All right. But, even so, the ordinary believer will not be able to pick out any specific premise or inference in the objection to his belief that is not obviously true and proper. As far as he can see, the argument proceeds from obvious premises through obvious inferences.

Cath. I'm sure that's true in many cases. But the believer can still be justified in holding that there's some premise or inference that's not obvious, that one can refuse to accept without irrationality.

Cal. Why?

Cath. Because he at least knows that there are many competent and honest inquirers who do not accept the force of the apparently defeating arguments. For all his lack of expertise, he is perfectly aware that all the *prima facie* defeaters of religious belief are highly controversial, that there are lots of experts in philosophy and other relevant disciplines who do not think all their premises are true and all their inferences proper. Otherwise, they would accept their conclusions. But if all the premises and inferences of an argument were obvious (i.e., if it were clearly irrational not to accept them), surely almost all experts would accept its conclusion. Hence the ordinary believer has good reason to think that the *prima facie* defeaters of his belief are not obviously sound, and this is sufficient to remove them as obstacles to his belief. He doesn't need to go on to a positive defense through reflection on the grounds of his basic belief.

Cal. So, if you're right, the community of Christian philosophers, for example, can play a crucial role in justifying the faith of nonphilosophical believers. Its mere existence as a group of competent and honest inquirers who are not convinced by the *prima facie* defeaters of religious belief shows the ordinary believer that he may reasonably hold on to his belief.

Cath. Right. Of course, it's not necessary that the crucial evidence of unconvinced experts come from believing philosophers; but it seems clear that, historically, this has been a central function of the Christian philosophical community (and other relevant communities of Christian scholars).

Cal. I'm prepared to admit that we may have been over-hasty in assuming that ordinary believers can't in some sense defeat the important *prima facie* defeaters of their belief. But I'm still concerned about the precise sense and significance of the defeat. In the cases we're talking about, the believer has neutralized an objection to his belief by noticing that it's based on premises and/or inferences that can be legitimately questioned, though he has no good reason for saying that the objection is wrong. He has no basis for evaluating its cogency; it's just not proven one way or another.

Cath. Of course. The believer has not provided a defeater for the *prima facie* defeater of his belief in the sense of showing that the objection is wrong. But

he has defeated it in the sense of showing that it's not undeniably right and that, consequently, it can be ignored with epistemic responsibility.

Cal. It *can* be ignored, but it *need not* be—there, I think, is the problem. The approach to the justification of belief we're discussing—Plantinga's approach—may well establish a right to believe, but it also establishes a right not to believe. After all, what does our defense of the ordinary believer's faith amount to? We're saying: "There are some important objections to what we believe that may or may not be cogent. We've no finally convincing reason to think they are right but can't show that they're wrong. The issues they raise are controversial ones on which reasonable people may disagree. It follows that we have a right to continue believing as we have been." All right. But it also follows that nonbelievers have an equally good right to continue not believing and, more important, that believers themselves have a right to give up believing if they're so inclined.

Cath. So your point is close to the one I made much earlier about Plantinga's use of the ontological argument to defend the reasonableness of belief. It shows belief to be weakly rational but not strongly rational.

Cal. Yes. And the problem is that showing belief to be weakly rational merely shows that I have a right but not necessarily an obligation to believe. It's fine for disarming objections but not for the positive task of fully justifying belief. Plantinga's account of the rationality of faith allows the believer to keep his faith if he wishes, but it says nothing against abandoning it if he wishes that.

Cath. Maybe we're making a mistake in speaking of believing as something a person can just choose to give up. Isn't belief something that happens to us rather than something we do? No matter how much you wanted to, you couldn't stop believing that $2 + 2 = 4$ or that you're not on Pluto.

Cal. I agree that, in some important cases, belief is ultimately an event that happens to us, not an action we perform. But I think there are also important cases in which belief is a matter of choice. This is often so, for example, when a scientist decides to accept a new and controversial theory. I think for some people religious belief may likewise be a conscious choice to accept certain teachings. In other cases, of course, belief is a deeply ingrained conviction that can't be immediately altered by a choice not to believe. But even such convictions may be freely abandoned by choosing lines of action that we know are likely to lead ultimately to not believing. In any case, my point is this: there are many believers who experience difficulties and doubts regarding their belief for whom believing or not is in fact something that is up to them. They are trying to decide whether or not to give up their faith. The sorts of considerations we've been discussing tell them that they can properly do either. Nonbelief is as defensible an option as belief. But, once you've granted that, you've given up a truly religious conception of belief. Faith is not something that we can rightly take

or leave as we choose. We *ought* to believe; it is a terrible thing not to. So it seems to me that the sort of belief we're able to present as rationally grounded is simply not the sort of belief religions require of their followers.

Cath. I'm not sure the sort of faith you're talking about is possible any more. Maybe there was a time when Christian belief was so entrenched in Western thought and mores that there wasn't any reasonable alternative to it, that those who denied it could only be foolish or perverse. But for us, Christian belief is fundamentally contestable. What's foolish or perverse is to say that the reality of God and His revelation in Christ are things any honest and reasonable person ought to believe in. I agree that there are grounds that make belief reasonable, but there are also grounds that make agnosticism or even atheism reasonable. Believers can maintain their right to believe, but that's all. Believing is one intellectually responsible attitude, but so is not believing. Faith is our personal belief. We can't claim to *know* that what we believe is true; we know it might be wrong and that others are justified in believing otherwise. In our world, there are too many difficulties, too much disagreement for an honest faith to be more than tentative.

Cal. That is the view of faith we're led to if we stick to the account of belief and its grounds we've given. I was suspicious from the beginning of your insistence that belief needs some sort of rational justification, if only for the sake of positive apologetics. I'll admit I was taken in for a while by the idea that we could positively justify belief by showing that it's properly basic. But now I see that even this move is a subtle undermining of belief.

Cath. Surely you're not suggesting that Plantinga is a covert opponent of religious belief?

Cal. Of course not. His intention in introducing the idea that religious belief is properly basic is just to show how we can answer the objectors who say our belief is irrational because we don't have compelling arguments for it. But our discussion has shown that at best this shows that we have a right, not an obligation, to believe. Your reaction to this conclusion is just to say that that's the sort of thing religious belief is nowadays; it's a matter of personal opinions and attitudes that are allowed but surely not required. My reaction is quite different. I agree that the most that can be shown to be rational is a right to believe. But to me this just shows that religious belief is not ultimately rational. The true believer is *obliged* to believe—all of us are objectively obliged to believe—by something that is beyond all human understanding and justification. No sort of rational considerations—whether the traditional sort of metaphysical and historical arguments or Plantinga's idea that religious beliefs are properly basic—can establish the need to believe. But religious belief can't be optional; God requires it of us. So I conclude that religious belief, properly understood, is not rationally justified—so much the worse for reason.

Cath. So much the worse for reason means so much the worse for us. What do we have more reliable than reason to guide us in decisions about religion?

Cal. We have divine revelation through the Spirit of God.

Cath. Perhaps. We know there are lots of people telling us that what they say is revealed. But what says we have to believe them?

Cal. If they do speak for God, God does; otherwise, nothing. But in either case, there's no place for rational justification.

Cath. Don't you at least need some justification for believing one purported revelation rather than another? You know perfectly well that if you'd been raised in Peking or Rome or Calcutta instead of Grand Rapids, you wouldn't have the religious beliefs you do. Don't you need some rational justification for preferring what you happen to believe?

Cal. Look. We're apparently agreed that there's little prospect rational justification can establish anything more than the right to believe. I know there's more than that: we've a duty to believe. So I conclude that, in just this respect, faith goes beyond reason. And I go with faith.

Cath. But you said you *know* there's a duty to believe; surely that implies some epistemic ground—some justification—for saying there's a duty to believe.

Cal. The knowledge, the duty, the belief are all in a religious sphere that transcends human reason. Your insistence on justification merely proves what I've suspected all along: you're an unwitting tool of the Enlightenment, of rationalist humanism. When all the chips are down, you prefer reason to faith. You refuse to see that faith has priority. You think our first duty is to be reasonable, that people can't be faulted if they believe things they've a rational right to believe. But that's wrong. Atheists and agnostics may have a *rational* right not to believe, but they still have a *religious* duty to believe. And that duty takes precedence.

Cath. It seems to me, then, that you're a fideist.

Cal. A name isn't a refutation. But before I accept it, I need to know what you mean by it.

Cath. I mean what Plantinga means by it: someone who agrees that fundamental religious beliefs are not among the deliverances of reason but nonetheless holds them.

Cal. And what is it to be among the deliverances of reason?

Cath. It's to be either properly basic or else adequately supported by what's properly basic.

Cal. Well, I think fundamental religious beliefs are properly basic—we are rationally entitled to believe them. So I'm not a fideist in Plantinga's sense.

Cath. I guess not. But you are in another important sense. You see religious belief as among the deliverances of reason only because you think you have an epistemic right to believe. But, if the deliverances of reason are taken rather to

be what we must believe if we are to be rational, then you don't see religious belief as part of the deliverances of reason and so are a fideist in this sense.

Cal. So, I suppose, is Plantinga. At least he's never done anything to show that we must believe if we're rational. But so what? You haven't shown that there's anything wrong with the position I'm taking.

Cath. No, I haven't. And, in fact, I don't really see how I could. It is obvious that religious belief is so central for you that you insist you're required to believe even though the requirement isn't rational. I don't share that attitude, but I don't see any way of refuting it. I can, however, point out that taking the attitude you do, there's nothing you can say to large numbers of troubled believers. There are many, many people raised as religious believers who've come to pose serious questions about their beliefs. They don't see any conclusive reasons against believing; but, though they hope that what they've been taught is true, they don't see any conclusive grounds for saying that it is true. They'd in some ways like to believe and maybe even agree that they've a right to. But they're also in many ways attracted to nonbelief. What they really want is to know if they should believe, but they see no reasonable grounds for such an obligation. Is there anything wrong with their giving up what they've been taught?

Cal. Of course there is. They'd be throwing away the most precious thing in their lives.

Cath. All right. But look at it from their point of view. They want to know if they should believe. Some believers tell them there are conclusive arguments for belief: metaphysical proofs of God's existence, historical bases for the truth of Christianity, pragmatic arguments for the value of believing, etc. But, upon examination, none of these turn out to be convincing. Other, more sophisticated believers, such as Plantinga, explain that, even if there's no good *argument* for believing, belief is rational because it is properly basic. Strictly, Plantinga never claims to have established this; he merely answers some objections to the view that religious belief is properly basic. But let's suppose our wavering believers agree that belief would be properly basic for them. That still only gives them the right to believe—something they already agree they have. It doesn't tell them a thing about whether they ought to believe. At this point, you come in and admit that there are no rational grounds for an obligation to believe but claim that they nonetheless ought to believe. Why should they pay any attention to you? You tell them they ought to be Christians, others say that they ought to be Moslems, others that they ought to be atheists. Unlike you, they don't buy the idea that there are obligations to believe that have no rational basis of any sort. Even if they granted that there were, they wouldn't know how to decide among the numerous conflicting claims of obligation in religious matters. So, even if your fideism is adequate for you, it does nothing at all for the wavering believers I'm concerned about.

Cal. I agree. But your point only supports what I'm maintaining. Belief is a matter of faith, not reason. Your wavering believers should stop hoping for guidance from reason. They can only pray and hope that God will give them faith. Then they'll see that all this agonizing over proofs and basic beliefs and justification was vain and foolish.

Cath. That can mean only one of two things: either they'll directly *see* that religious beliefs are true, which will mean that they have experiences grounding their beliefs, in which case a rational justification through an explication of these grounds is possible; or they'll merely have an overwhelming feeling of subjective certainty about religious beliefs, which may make it psychologically difficult or even impossible for them not to believe, but which says nothing at all about any objective obligation to believe.

Cal. You're assuming that the believer's experience must be expressible in the categories of rational thought. My point is that it can't be. I see now that this talk of justification and grounds of belief is an implicit reductionism. It denies the utterly unique, supernatural character of religious faith and tries to derive faith from natural conditions and considerations. All this philosophy of religion leads only to an idolatry of reason.

Cath. I don't accept the either/or between being reasonable and being religious. Though I don't entirely see how to do it, I won't be content until I can see my way to a faith that is strongly rational.

Cal. You have your work cut out for you.

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NOTES

1. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, tr. James F. Anderson, Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1975, Book I, chapter 6.
2. John Calvin, *Institute of the Christian Religion*, tr. F. L. Battles, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960, Book I, chapter 3.
3. Alvin Plantinga, "The Rationality of Belief in God," in A. Plantinga and N. Woltersdorff (eds.), *Faith and Rationality*, Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1983, p. 42.