

IN RESPONSE TO: THE CASE FOR A CASE: CHRISTIAN  
APOLOGETICS IN PERSPECTIVE (/ARTICLES/THE-CASE-FOR-A-  
CASE-CHRISTIAN-APOLOGETICS-IN-PERSPECTIVENBSP)

## ON KNOWING

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A Christian is politely asked by a friend to explain the source of her faith. She answers that while she sees evidence for her beliefs in the world, her faith stems from the sense of the divine imbued within her, and that her feeling of God is justification enough. The questioner is unsure what to make of this response. Should the questioner object and ask for evidence and apologetics, or is the believer right in that her experience is a sufficient foundation for her belief?

In "The Case For A Case", Sharon Christner, citing William Lane Craig, posits that the role of apologetics is in *show[ing] Christianity is true* rather than *knowing Christianity to be true*; that while arguments can lead someone to faith, it is ultimately the role of 'sensus divinitatis' - the divine sense, mediated through the Holy Ghost, to provide the necessary experience to justify belief.<sup>1</sup> While Christner argues that experience can legitimately source belief, religious faith is better mediated by evidence and theory.<sup>2</sup> Both Christner and Craig rely on the theory of 'reformed epistemology', of leading modern Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga.<sup>3</sup> Plantinga develops his theory over three books, the first two largely secular, and the third *Warranted Christian Belief* linking his framework to Christianity. To do so, he builds on foundationalism, an established school of

epistemology (the study of thought).

Foundationalism, the basis of reformed epistemology solves the problem of needing justification for propositions and then needing justification for justifications in infinite regress. 'Modest foundationalism' holds that 'basic beliefs' must not be subject to strong counterarguments and must fulfill at least one of the following criteria:<sup>4</sup>

1. infallible
2. indubitable
3. incorrigible
4. be based on perception

Plantinga extends this with reformed epistemology, theorizing that 'sensus divinitatus' provides 'warrant', or validation, for belief in God.<sup>5</sup> This model allows Christian faith to be warranted, without presentation of external evidences. Plantinga's argument revolves around the notion of 'properly basic' beliefs. These beliefs might not fulfill the aforementioned criteria of foundationalism; however, Plantinga considers them simple enough to not rely on other beliefs for their validity. He adjusts the criteria to include beliefs that are either self-evident or reflect the state of mind of the believer, such as the belief that one is sad. Plantinga argues a belief is properly basic provided it is grounded and without strong objections. He explains grounding as a confluence of factors including one's cognitive state and environment.<sup>6</sup>

These notions have served two decades of philosophical debate, resulting in the most well known counterargument to Plantinga's theories: 'the great pumpkin objection'. The objection raises the following question "why cannot just any belief be properly basic?... What about the belief that the Great Pumpkin returns every Halloween?"<sup>7</sup> Plantinga rebuts: "to recognize that some kinds of belief are properly basic... doesn't for a moment commit one to thinking all other kinds are". Plantinga doesn't provide criteria for recognition, but asserts that we are able to assign beliefs to the categories of "properly basic" or "not" similarly to how we differentiate meaningful from meaningless sentences without a theory of meaning. He asserts that each community is responsible for determining sets of basic beliefs. While Plantinga is correct that the Great Pumpkin objection is weak, the objection highlights that for Plantinga's framework to be successful it has to limit what beliefs can be basic.

'The Son of the Great Pumpkin' argument, proposed by Michael Martin, prominent atheist philosopher, points out that Plantinga's proposal would "allow any belief at all to become properly basic from the point of view of *some* community".<sup>8</sup> Martin rightly notes that while members within the community would be able to assert their correctness, observers outside a community would not be forced to accept the belief as rational. Thus if we

accept Plantinga's theory, we must accept the notion that many beliefs we object to (eg; at earth theory) can also be basic and thus warranted to certain communities. We are thus stripped of much ability to critique the beliefs of other communities. While this is not an "epistemic free for all", it shifts the burden of evidence in a way most intuitively object to.<sup>9</sup>

To strengthen his theory, Plantinga analogizes with the 'basic belief' we hold in regards to our memories. While we no longer have immediate access to events that occurred in our past, foundationalists often claim memory itself provides warrant. Plantinga argues that 'sensus divinitus' plays a similar role in religious belief. However, the beliefs that are supported by our memory are not propositions of the form "P occurred" but rather "I have a memory of the occurrence of P". It is important to note that we can only extend this to "P occurred" with further evidence. This is the difference between saying "I ate cake for breakfast on June 14, 2001" and "I have a memory of eating cake for breakfast on June 14, 2001", with the latter reflecting our cognitive state rather than giving us verified knowledge about the external world.

Jeremy Koons also highlights the difficulty in drawing a connection between our cognitive state and knowledge of the external world in the following example:

"St Elmo's fire is a glowing region of atmospheric electricity... Suppose Smith and Jones observe the same phenomenon... Smith is well read in science ..and without hesitation judges the observed phenomenon to be St Elmo's fire. ... because of Smith's background theories, the stimuli he is presented with cause him to form a belief that is consonant with those theories. Jones' worldview, ..is a poorly supported pastiche of superstition and the paranormal, which he has acquired from poorly sourced websites... With this background, Jones, without hesitation, judges the observed phenomenon to be a ghost."<sup>10</sup>

Plantinga's theory is best suited to defending a simple, 'low-level' belief such as "I see green" which does not require a justification beyond the experience of the color. However, Koons' example demonstrates that the justification of a complex, or 'high level' belief such as St. Elmo's fire demands evidence and explanation beyond the experience itself. Religious beliefs, such as faith in God, work in similar ways.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Koons notes that even if religious beliefs were to qualify as 'properly basic' under Plantinga's framework, their inherent complexity, relative to statements such as "I see green" poses an issue. Religious beliefs necessarily generate a reliance on other beliefs to ascribe meaning to their content. This leaves them more open to challenge than would be expected of a basic belief. Plantinga does consider this argument in brief but fails to solve the problem, noting only that "perhaps the thing to say is that such judgements are... partially basic", which isn't the properly basic belief required for the grounding of faith.<sup>12</sup>

According to Andrew Moon, arguments against Plantinga fail to differentiate between perceptual beliefs and religious beliefs.<sup>13</sup> Koons and other critics are essentially attacking

the theory of foundationalism underlying Plantinga's theories such that accepting Koons' argument would not only mean rejecting the basicity of religious beliefs, but the basicity of perceptual beliefs as well. However this does not substantively address the concerns raised in the above critiques.

Finally, Plantinga's framework offers no path to *de novo* (new) belief. At best, it can justify religious notions already intuitive to a believer, leaving Christianity reliant on the evidentially spurious argument that through the Holy Spirit, all humans experience revelation.

Reformed epistemology serves as the best instance of modern attempts to ground belief in religious experience. However, counters serve to indicate that it would be unwise to rely upon such a theory as the prime justification for one's beliefs. While many fundamentalist models are similarly undermined, this is reason not to abandon all belief, but to adopt positions defended by multiple models. Christians should thus justify faith not by divine sense alone, but through means of apologetics. This serves to better ensure beliefs are truth tracking, and allow for improved conversation with Christians, and those who are not.

1. See <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/answering-critics-of-the-inner-witness-of-the-spirit> for Craig explaining his understanding of 'Sensus Divinatus' as devised by Plantinga

2. Craig, W.L., & Craig, W.L. Reasonable faith: Christian truth and apologetics. Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books. 1994

3. Plantinga is an emeritus professor in theology and western analytic philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. His work and biography are nicely summarized at <http://theor.jinr.ru/~kuzemsky/plantingabio.html>.

4. See <http://www.iep.utm.edu/found-ep/> a. i. for further explanations of each of the terms

5. More technically, warrant is "the property which turns mere true belief into knowledge when possessed in sufficient degree." (Plantinga 2000). For the purpose of this article we ignore the distinction between warrant and justification.

6. Plantinga, Alvin. Warranted Christian Belief. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

7. Plantinga, Alvin; Wolterstorff, Nicolas. "Reason and Belief in God' in Faith and Rationality". Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983, 16–93.

8. Martin, Michael Atheism: A Philosophical Justification, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990, p. 272.

9. "Reformed Epistemology", IEP: Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2017, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/ref-epis/>

10. Koons, J. R. . Plantinga on properly basic belief in God: lessons from the epistemology of perception. The Philosophical Quarterly, 2011, 61(245), 839-850.

11. Dawes, G. W. Basic beliefs and Christian faith. Religious Studies, 2015, 51(01), 61-74.

12. Plantinga, Alvin. Warrant and Proper Function. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Pages 100-101

13. Ibid.

14. Moon, A. Recent work in reformed epistemology. Philosophy Compass, 2016 , 11(12), 879-891.

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**Locust Walk is a student-led Christian publication that exists to present the perspectives of faith and non-faith worldviews on questions of truth and purpose. Through active dialogue within the University of Pennsylvania, we seek to build relationships modeled after the life and teachings of Jesus Christ who informs our understanding of cultural engagement, reconciliation, and community. We pledge to cultivate an environment where the pursuit of solidarity in diversity can lay a foundation for conversation conducted with love and mutual respect.**

## **STATEMENT OF FAITH**

**We believe in one God,  
the Father almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all things visible and invisible.**

**And in one Lord Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
begotten from the Father before all ages,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father.  
Through him all things were made.**

**For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven;  
he became incarnate  
by the Holy Spirit  
and the virgin Mary, and was made human.**

**He was crucified for us  
under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered and was buried.**

**The third day he rose again,  
according to the Scriptures.  
He ascended to heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again with glory  
to judge the living and the dead.**

**His kingdom will never end.**

**And we believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the Lord, the giver of life.**

**He proceeds from the Father and  
with the Father and the Son  
is worshiped and glorified.**

**He spoke through the prophets.**

**We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.**

**We affirm one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.**

**We look forward to the resurrection of the dead,  
and to life in the world to come.**

**Amen.**

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