

# The Rationality of Religious Beliefs

By Michael Cariño

Is belief in God rational? The atheist says “No” due to the lack of evidence. Theists who say “Yes” fall into two major categories: (1) those who claim that **belief in God has sufficient evidence** for it to be rational (i.e. Theistic evidentialists), and (2) those who claim that **belief in God does not require evidence** for it to be rational (i.e. Reformed epistemologists). Theists who say “No” are those who claim that **belief in God does not belong to the realm of the rational** (i.e. Philosophical fideists).<sup>1</sup>

This paper seeks to explore the contention that there is enough evidence to ground rational belief in God. While this paper does not attempt to do a detailed analysis of the arguments for the existence of God, the writer will try to examine (1) what is rationality?, (2) is it rational to believe in God?, (3) what are the arguments against the rationality of belief in God?, and (4) what are the arguments for the rationality of belief in God?

## What is Rationality?

Reason is a means for human beings to discover truth or grasp reality. Fallible as it is, rationality is more a matter of how one believes than what one believes. While some people “irrationally believe something that is true” (e.g. someone may believe that the earth is round because he encircles around it every night using a flying carpet), others might “rationally believe something that is false” (e.g. it was rational for people two thousand years ago to believe that the earth is flat). However, other thinkers propose that rationality is also based on the context of the person and the specific situation: “what is rational for one person at a particular time and place might not be rational for another person at a different time and place.”<sup>2</sup> The rationality of religious

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<sup>1</sup> Kelly James Clark, “Religious Epistemology,” in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Article on-line, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/relig-ep/>, accessed February 28, 2012; Eugene W. Lyman, “The Rationality of Belief in the Reality of God,” in *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (Sep., 1922), pp. 449-465, Published by: The University of Chicago Press, Article on-line, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1195106>, accessed February 28, 2012; Peter Forrest, “The Epistemology of Religion,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta, ed., Article on-line, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/religion-epistemology/>, accessed February 28, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

belief is typically discussed abstractly, independent of any particular believer and often believed to be settled once and for all either positively (Aquinas) or negatively (Hume).

But, in light of the view that rationality is also based on the believer's context, perhaps a better question should be, "Is belief in God rational for this person in that time and place?"<sup>3</sup>

Many epistemologists believe that rationality is a normative property possessed by a belief or a believer. The Enlightenment period of the sixteenth century enthroned reason and defined its central role for inference:

Rationality is often a matter of assembling available (empirical or propositional) evidence and assessing its deductive or inductive support for other beliefs. The vast majority of philosophical, scientific, ethical, theological and even commonsensical beliefs rationally require the support of evidence or argument. Rationality is simply a matter propositional evidence and its logical bearing on the conclusion. If it can be shown that an argument is invalid or weak, belief in its conclusion would be irrational for every person in every time and place.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, some epistemologists disagree with the above definition and they argue that "rationality in many cases need not, and cannot, require (valid or strong) inference. Our rational cognitive faculties include a wide variety of belief-producing mechanisms, few of which could or should pass the test of inference."<sup>5</sup> Thus, this view argues that rationality of belief is not always dependent on empirical and propositional evidence.

### **Is it Rational to Believe in God?**

Is God simply an emotional projection of man (Ludwig Feuerbach)? An opium of the people (Karl Marx)? A resentment of those who have inferior minds (Friedrich Nietzsche)? An illusion of those who have remained childish (Sigmund Freud)? An imagined impossibility (Jean-Paul Sartre)? A placebo for fear (Bertrand Russel)? A delusion (Richard Dawkins)? Atheism's march through modern history has resulted to the ever increasing notion that belief in God is irrational -- that religious belief is nothing but a crutch for the psychologically weak and the mentally frail.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Thomas Reid, Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, et al. have argued that belief in God does not require the support of evidence or argument in order for it to be rational.

However, a growing number of philosophers, scientists, and scholars are saying otherwise. Many epistemologists argue that it is reasonable to hold religious belief, and that belief in God is rationally justified. A growing number of philosophers affirm that the existence of God can be demonstrated or made probable by argument.

Great minds have wrestled with the probability of rational belief in God --- from Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas, to Rene Descartes, John Locke, George Berkeley, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Hegel, Wilhelm Leibniz, Blaise Pascal, William James, Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, Baruch Spinoza, Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, Teilhard de Chardin, Martin Heidegger, Auguste Comte, Arthur Schopenhauer, Johann Wittgenstein, Thomas Reid, and Alvin Plantinga --- and came out of the flames of skepticism and the tests of evidentialism still convinced (in various degrees) that religious belief is reasonable, defensible, and justified.

The philosophers mentioned above (to name a few), in one way or another, claim that belief in a Supreme Being is rational. It would be great to try to understand why such epistemology of religion does not seem to vanish into the abyss of obscurity and irrationalism.

### **Arguments Against the Rationality of Belief in God**

Most evidentialist and foundationalist philosophers<sup>6</sup> demand that all beliefs be subjected to the searching criticism of reason; if a belief cannot survive the scrutiny of reason, it is irrational. They argue that:

- (1) Belief in God is rational only if there is sufficient evidence for the existence of God.
- (2) There is not sufficient evidence for the existence of God.
- (3) Therefore, belief in God is irrational.

Bertrand Russell was once asked, if he were to come before God, what he would say to God. Russell replied, "Not enough evidence God, not enough evidence."<sup>7</sup> David Hume also affirms, "A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence."<sup>8</sup> Since evidence is that which justifies belief, William Clifford defends the strict principle that we are

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<sup>6</sup> Such as David Hume, W. K. Clifford, J. L. Mackie, Bertrand Russell, and Michael Scriven.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Kelly, "Evidence," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta, ed., Article on-line, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/evidence/>, accessed February 28, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

always obliged to have sufficient evidence for all our beliefs. Clifford asserts, "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence."<sup>9</sup>

It seems that William Clifford and other evidentialists are saying that it is better to suspend judgment and avoid error whenever sufficient proof is inadequate. Thus, this view can lead to the presumption to the idea that it is unreasonable, irresponsible, or immoral to believe in God until enough proof is established.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, non-evidentialists like William James would argue that, for practical reasons, it is often better to believe even when there is insufficient evidence. He insists that there are cases when evidence comes only after we made the leap of faith. This view implies that it is rational to believe in God because to act by faith in order to pursue truth is more reasonable than to be paralyzed by the fear of error or insufficient evidence.<sup>11</sup>

But what is evidence? How much evidence does one need before a judgment or a conclusion is made? How does one determine which philosophical evidence warrants belief to be rational? Generally, most epistemologists tended to think of evidence as: (1) "sense data" (Russel) --- mental items of one's present consciousness with which one is immediately acquainted, (2) "sensory receptor stimulations" (Quine), (3) observation statements or "protocol sentence" (Carnap), (4) the totality of "known propositions" (Williamson), (5) "occurrent thoughts" that one is having at a given time (Conee and Feldman), and (6) those "beliefs of which one is psychologically certain" (Bayes).<sup>12</sup> In other words, epistemic evidences for the rationality or irrationality of religious belief can be gained through our senses, our perception, our observations, our experiences, our thoughts, our propositions, and our logical reasoning.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., William K. Clifford, "Ethics of Belief," in *The Theory of Knowledge: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, Louis Pojman, ed. (Canada: Wadsworth Thomas Learning, 2003), 515-518.

<sup>10</sup> Clifford, "Ethics of Belief," 515-518.

<sup>11</sup> William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Theory of Knowledge: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, Louis Pojman, ed. (Canada: Wadsworth Thomas Learning, 2003), 518-526.

<sup>12</sup> Kelly, "Evidence," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition).

## Arguments For the Rationality of Belief in God

There are theists who reject evidentialism and opted to walk the path explored by William James, Blaise Pascal, Jack Meiland, Thomas Reid, Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Ronald Nash, and others who argue that belief in a Cosmic Deity is rational, reasonable, and right even in the absence of proof.

However, the writer seeks to pursue the trail created by other theists who employ proofs or evidence to validate the rationality of religious belief (i.e. Thomas Aquinas, William Paley, John Newman, Richard Swinburne, William Craig, Richard Purtill, James Moreland, Michael Rea, Keith Ward, William Alston, John Hick, Alister McGrath, Peter Kreeft, John Hick, Hans Kung, John Polkinghorne, Norman Geisler, et al). There seems to be another way of pointing to the existence of God apart from divine revelation and faith.

Having identified several patterns of what constitutes evidence that justifies belief, let us examine whether arguments for belief in God could survive the scrutiny of reason. Theistic evidentialism holds that:

- (1) Belief in God is rational only if there is sufficient evidence for the existence of God.
- (2) There is sufficient evidence for the existence of God.
- (3) Therefore, belief in God is rational.

There were several Greek philosophers and Medieval theologians who first developed arguments for a Supreme Being simply by observing the natural world, but it was Thomas Aquinas who championed the philosophical inquiry about the existence of God using the sources of evidence from sensation, reason, science, and history. This approach is known as natural theology --- the accumulation of proofs and descriptions of God without using sacred texts or special revelation --- a merging of theism and evidentialism.<sup>13</sup> Today, many theistic epistemologists are following his lead, affirming that scientific data and logical arguments can build a strong case for a rationalist theism.

William Craig, for example, has developed a new version cosmological argument for the existence of God. This argument attempts to demonstrate that the universe has a beginning and a cause that began in the Big Bang at some specific point in the past.

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<sup>13</sup> James Brent, "Natural Theology," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Article on-line, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/theo-nat/#H6>, accessed March 1, 2012.

Robin Collins, a physicist-philosopher, have argued that the discoveries of modern science reveal to us that the laws and constants of physics conspire to make the universe habitable for life. The apparent fine-tuning of the cosmological constants (e.g. the Earth's right location, right mass, right distance from the sun, right atmosphere, right orbit, right galaxy) to nurture and permit human life is best explained by God's intelligent superintendence. Michael Behe, and other biochemists, argue that irreducibly complex biological systems such as cells or kidneys could not have arisen by chance, they point to an intelligent design. Robert Adams has revived moral arguments for the existence of God.<sup>14</sup>

James Moreland showed that current scientific findings concludes that "consciousness" or "mind" or "soul" is a separate entity from the brain and can continue even after a person's brain has stopped functioning. He argues, "If the universe began with dead matter having no consciousness, how, then, do you get something totally different --- conscious, living, thinking, feeling, believing creatures --- from materials that don't have that?" William Alston and John Newman have defended religious experience as a source of justified belief in the existence of God. In addition, theistic arguments have been developed that are based on the existence of flavors, colors and beauty. Richard Swinburne, contend that the cumulative forces of these various kinds of evidence mutually reinforce the likelihood or probability of God's existence.<sup>15</sup> Thus, there is a growing epistemological movement defending the claim that belief in God is rational based on the evidence. Securing belief in God on the basis of evidence or argument is an ongoing project.

However, there is an on-going debate on what standards and criteria should build up for "sufficient evidence" that enables one to pass judgment on the rationality or irrationality of a belief. This means that if religious belief is to be tried in a court of law, and the jurors (or judge) are the inquiring people, there would never be a unanimous decision. At the end of the day, it is up to every person to decide whether the

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<sup>14</sup> Lee Strobel, *The Case for a Creator* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 279-283; Timothy Keller, *The Reason For God* (New York, NY: Dutton, 2008), 127-135; Norman Geisler, *When Skeptics Ask: A Handbook on Christian Evidences* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2006), 15-25; Hans Kung, *Does God Exist: Answers for Today* (London, SCM Press, 1991); Alvin Plantinga, *Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1983).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

arguments presented have persuaded him or her to believe or reject the proposition. While there has been no general agreement yet among epistemologists on how to ground rational or justified belief, the arguments are still worth hearing.

### Conclusion

Having used the analogy of a court trial, it would be important to express at least two presumptions by the writer: (1) Religious faith is not guilty until proven innocent. The burden of proof does not lie on the religious believer but rather on the accuser. Belief in the existence of God must be considered justified (innocent) until proven guilty<sup>16</sup>; and (2) the task in this kind of epistemic “court trial” is to make a judgment which is in accordance with “the preponderance of the evidence.” A “clear and convincing proof” in this context is defined in terms of a “high probability” for a “reasonable case” but may not necessarily be a case of “beyond reasonable doubt.”<sup>17</sup>

Physicist-turned-theologian John Polkinghorne said, “A big, fundamental question, like belief in God (or disbelief), is not settled by a single argument. It’s too complicated for that. What one has to do is consider lots of different issues and see whether or not the answers one gets add up to a total picture that makes sense.”<sup>18</sup>

Is belief in God rational? The atheists say “No” due to lack of evidence, but theistic evidentialists say “Yes” because there is ample evidence. This paper was able to explore the contention that there is enough evidence to ground rational belief in God, without dealing exhaustively with the arguments for the existence of God. The writer examined what rationality is, the rationality of belief in God, and the arguments for and against the rationality of belief in God. The writer appreciates the amount of sensible data and coherent arguments that theistic evidentialists are contributing to the table of debate. Their scientific analysis and philosophical insights are fresh breathers from the foul smell of the irrational tirades from religious fanaticism. Natural theology is a positive contribution to a stronger case for rational belief in God.

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<sup>16</sup> Ronald Nash, *Faith and Reason* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 113-114.

<sup>17</sup> Rem Edwards, *Reason and Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 222.

<sup>18</sup> John Polkinghorne, *Quarks, Chaos, and Christianity* (New York, Crossroad, 1994), 25.

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