

## NOTES AND COMMENTS

### PLANTINGA ON WARRANTED CHRISTIAN BELIEF

Alvin Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief*<sup>1</sup> is the final book in his three-volume exploration of warrant, which he takes to be the property of propositional knowledge differentiating it from mere true belief. He employs the conception of warrant developed in his second volume, *Warrant and Proper Function*,<sup>2</sup> in defending the intellectual respectability of Christian belief.

Plantinga's chief contention is that, if Christian belief is true, then it is probably warranted. In support of his central argument for this thesis, he expounds a model on which Christian belief is warranted, as well as justified and rational. He also argues that there are no good objections to the model that do not apply as well to Christian belief, and that, if his case succeeds, atheologians can no longer credibly argue that Christian belief is epistemically deficient while dodging the thornier question of its truth.

Though sympathetic to Plantinga's aim of defending the respectability of Christian belief, we shall advance two objections which, while not impugning the truth of Christian belief, call into question the model's possibility. We shall argue, furthermore, that even if Plantinga had shown that Christian belief is warranted if true, the cognitive inaccessibility of the sort of warrant he proposes (we will call this 'Plantinga warrant') would mean that it would be of little or no value in defeating an important atheological challenge to the epistemic status of Christian belief.

#### I

Plantinga's central argument may be encapsulated in a syllogism:

- (P1) If Christian belief is true, then the model he proposes (or a closely similar one) is probably true.
- (P2) If the model he proposes (or a closely similar one) is probably true, then Christian belief is probably (Plantinga) warranted.
- (C) Hence, if Christian belief is true, then it is probably (Plantinga) warranted.<sup>3</sup>

In support of this argument, Plantinga presents what he takes to be a possible model on which Christian belief, if true, is warranted. This model plays an essential role in his defence of the argument's premises, for defending the probability claims of these premises requires establishing that the model (or a closely similar one) is at least possible.

According to Plantinga, 'to give a model of a proposition or state of affairs *S* is to show *how it could be* that *S* is true or actual'.<sup>4</sup> He takes a model to be 'another proposition (or state of affairs), one such that it is clear (1) that it is possible and (2) that if it is true, then so is the target proposition'.<sup>5</sup> Plantinga claims that the model he gives is indeed possible and that this shows that it is possible that Christian belief has warrant. The possibility here, he says, is not only logical but also epistemic, *i.e.*, the model is consistent with what we know, or at least with what participants in the discussion generally agree on.<sup>6</sup> But although he believes the model is true, he does not claim to show that it is true, for the model presupposes that Christian belief is true and Plantinga says he does not know how one could 'show' that Christianity is true.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, he notes that there is a range of models on which classical Christian belief is warranted, and he proposes that 'if classical Christianity is true, then one of these models is very likely also true'.<sup>8</sup>

Plantinga calls his model the 'extended Aquinas/Calvin (A/C)' model for warranted Christian belief.<sup>9</sup> On the model, Christian belief<sup>10</sup> is usually a kind of knowledge; that is, the belief is true and typically warranted. It is warranted because it is normally produced in a way that satisfies what he takes to be the conditions necessary and sufficient for warranted belief, to wit: the belief is 'produced by cognitive processes functioning properly in an appropriate environment according to a design plan successfully aimed at the production of true belief'.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the properly functioning cognitive process is the activity of the Holy Spirit working in a person to form Christian belief.<sup>12</sup> The production of Christian belief through this process—or belief-forming mechanism as he repeatedly puts it—is analogous to the production of other kinds of belief through other cognitive processes, such as perception and memory.<sup>13</sup> And just as beliefs generated by the latter processes are normally warranted because those processes function properly according to a successful design plan, the same holds for Christian belief. For it is impossible that the activity of the Holy Spirit could *fail* to function properly, and the design plan of this process is God's intention for us to know His truth by this means.<sup>14</sup>

The model also provides that 'the beliefs constituting faith are typically taken as basic; that is, they are not accepted by way of argument from other propositions'.<sup>15</sup> They are not upshots of reasoning or of attention to evidence. Rather, the Holy Spirit brings them about in a person directly, immediately, in a supernatural process distinct from perception, memory, and our other natural cognitive processes.<sup>16</sup> The phenomenology of this process is one of coming to see, or of forming a conviction: 'There is a reading or hearing, and then there is the belief or conviction that what one reads or hears is true and the teaching of the Lord'.<sup>17</sup> The process is *tripartite*, in that it involves (1) Scripture (a communication from God), (2) the inward invitation or instigation of the Holy Spirit (internal witness or testimony that gets us to see and believe 'that the propositions proposed for our beliefs in Scripture really *are* a word from the Lord'), and (3) Christian belief.<sup>18</sup>

In getting us to 'believe the great things of the gospel,' the Holy Spirit brings about a cognitive renewal in us, repairing our cognitive faculties—especially the primordial *sensus divinitatis*—from the ravages of sin.<sup>19</sup> In restoring the *sensus divinitatis*, the Holy Spirit enables us once again to 'see God and be put in mind of him in the sorts of situation in which the belief-producing process is designed to work'.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the Holy Spirit's healing activity gives us a clearer view of our world (in particular, of its being God's creation), of God's glory, and of the heinousness of sin.<sup>21</sup>

Having set out his model, Plantinga maintains that, if Christian belief is true, there are no good philosophical objections to the model. This is significant for, as Plantinga observes, 'If (as I claim) the fact is there are no good philosophical objections to the model, given the *truth* of Christian belief, then any successful objection to the model will also have to be a successful objection to the truth of Christian belief'.<sup>22</sup> We shall argue, however, that there are good philosophical objections to the model that are *not* also objections to the truth of Christian belief. Before presenting those objections, we shall consider in the next section a more general point about Plantinga's treatment of objections.

## II

The extended A/C model entails the propositional content of Christian belief because it presupposes that Christian belief is true.<sup>23</sup> However, as Plantinga<sup>24</sup> himself acknowledges, the propositional content of Christian belief does not entail the extended A/C model, since the latter includes propositions not entailed by those of

Christian belief. (One example is the model's provision that Christian belief normally results from the Holy Spirit's acting directly in a person, with that activity constituting a cognitive process akin to perception, memory, and the like. This speculative claim is clearly not entailed by Christian belief *per se*.) To state the point another way, there are possible worlds in which Christian belief is true but the model false.

In this light, consider Plantinga's claim that there are no good philosophical objections to his extended A/C model that are not also objections to the truth of Christian belief. Any reason for a non-Plantingan model on which Christian belief is probably warranted if true would constitute an objection to Plantinga's model. But nowhere does he argue against any such alternative model. Nor does he argue against fideist *Christian* objections to the thesis that Christian belief is knowledge or warranted if true, even though accepting his model entails denying that Christian belief involves the sort of leap of faith, objective uncertainty, and risk so eloquently described by some Christian fideists.<sup>25</sup> Presenting a model that entails the falsity of Christian fideism does not by itself show that there are no good Christian fideist objections to the model.

Indeed, Plantinga does not argue against *any* objection to his model *per se*, only against atheological objections to Christian belief. But since Christian belief does not entail his model, he cannot show, by arguing against atheological objections to Christian belief, that there are no good philosophical objections to his model. Objections to Christian belief are objections to his model, but objections to his model need not be objections to Christian belief.

### III

In this section, we raise two objections that call into question the possibility of Plantinga's model. Since neither of them impugn the truth of Christian belief, they undercut his claim that there are no good philosophical objections to his model that are not also objections to the truth of Christian belief itself.

*Objection 1: Plantinga's model provides an incoherent account of the formation of Christian belief.*

In presenting his model, Plantinga repeatedly characterizes the activity of the Holy Spirit in the formation of Christian belief as a 'cognitive process or belief-forming mechanism'. The following example is typical: 'the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit working in concord with God's teaching in Scripture is a cognitive process or belief-forming mechanism that produces in us the beliefs constituting faith'.<sup>26</sup> However, phrases like 'cognitive process' and 'belief-forming mechanism' cannot be meaningfully applied to the Holy Spirit's activity in a person's acquiring Christian belief. In fact, the model's use of these descriptions in this connection is incoherent, in more than one respect.

First, it is a conceptual error to describe any sort of *activity*, including a belief-forming activity, as a 'mechanism'. An activity is a series of *events*, while a mechanism is something that *engages in* an activity, undergoing the events that constitute its behaviour. A belief-forming *process* consists in the *activity* or *functioning* of a belief-forming *mechanism*. Thus, Plantinga is wrong to treat 'cognitive process' and 'belief-producing mechanism' as more or less synonymous descriptions of the activity of the Holy Spirit in generating Christian belief.

Second, what is true of a belief-forming process in a person, taking perception and memory as paradigms, cannot intelligibly be said of the activity of the Holy Spirit in the person's coming to have Christian belief. Belief-forming processes are the operations of mechanisms that, in producing beliefs, display regular, law-like

behaviour that can be seen as instantiating input–output functions. A belief-forming mechanism is an organic component of a person’s cognitive system (and hence part of the person herself), that complex network of mechanisms that is the source of (at least most of) one’s cognitive states (belief, doubt, suspicion, etc.). To describe an activity of the Holy Spirit as a ‘cognitive process’ similar to perception and memory is to imply that the Holy Spirit acts as a belief-forming *mechanism*, the mechanism whose functioning constitutes the cognitive *process* that (on Plantinga’s model) produces Christian belief. But this implication is most certainly false. The Holy Spirit acts as a person, not as a mechanism. Whereas the activities of mechanisms are law-like series of events that they passively undergo as they realize input–output functions, the activities of the Holy Spirit are the intentional and free *actions* of a personal being in pursuit of His own divine purposes. Rather than being events that happen *to* Him, the activities of the Holy Spirit are actions motivated solely by the divine will. Thus, unlike the ‘programmed’ behaviour of a mechanism, the activity of the Holy Spirit is *free*, the expression of His personal *autonomy*.

In sum, the extended A/C model provides an incoherent account of the formation of Christian belief, for the *free* activity of the Holy Spirit cannot be a cognitive process or belief-forming mechanism.

*Objection 2: Even if the extended A/C model’s account of the formation of Christian belief were coherent, it would be logically inconsistent with an important implication of Christian belief.*

The content of Christian belief includes numerous propositions about the general relationship between God and human beings as well as specific relationships between God and certain individuals and groups. According to Christian doctrine, God’s dealings with human beings include: his creating and sustaining us; his promising Abraham to make of his descendants a great nation; his ordaining the children of Israel as his chosen people; his offering redemption and salvation to all people through Jesus Christ; his sending the Holy Spirit to create and nurture communities of faith, which includes helping individuals accept the gospel and become members of these communities. These actions involve relations between distinct persons—God and the special creatures he made ‘in his own image’. Our point here is that much of the content of Christian belief entails that God’s relationships with us are genuinely *personal relationships*—relationships between *separate* persons.

The extended A/C model’s claim that the activity of the Holy Spirit in one’s acquiring Christian belief is a cognitive process of a person, entails the claim that the Holy Spirit performs this activity as a *part* of the person’s cognitive system and so as a part of the person herself. We have argued that this implication is incoherent. Here, however, we simply note that this implication (its incoherence aside) is inconsistent with the proposition, entailed by Christian belief, that in God’s dealings with us, he and we remain distinct persons, and thus that God does not become *part* of a human person, even if he indwells in that person. Hence, the present objection to Plantinga’s model is that one of its key claims is incompatible with an important proposition entailed by the content of Christian belief.<sup>27</sup>

Interestingly, our point that God and we remain distinct persons is suggested by other terms Plantinga uses in describing the activity of the Holy Spirit in the formation of Christian belief, namely, ‘testimony’ and ‘witness’. To *give testimony* or *bear witness* to a particular truth is a matter of *presenting* that proposition as a *candidate for belief*, attempting to *persuade* another person of its truth. In the giving and receiving of testimony, the witness and the hearer remain separate individuals. The recipient may or may not come to believe the claim presented to her. Two observations must be made here. First, it should be clear that the model’s describing the Holy Spirit’s activity in bringing about Christian belief as ‘testimony’ or ‘witness’ is incompatible with describing it as a ‘cognitive process’. The former implies that the

Holy Spirit and the believer remain distinct persons, while the latter implies that the Holy Spirit somehow functions as a part of the believer's cognitive system. Second, the 'testimony' picture, unlike the 'cognitive process' picture, captures the common conviction among many Christians that, when they came to believe 'the great things of the gospel', God in various ways *presented* them with the gospel and *they* responded by *accepting* it, coming to believe it with the *help* of the Holy Spirit. Like any good witness, the Holy Spirit *assists* a person in her coming to believe the truth offered to her, but he doesn't *directly* or *immediately produce* in her a belief, as cognitive processes do.

If our two objections are sound, Plantinga's model fails to provide a possible account of the formation of Christian belief, and so fails to illustrate that, and how, Christian belief 'can perfectly well have warrant'. Moreover, we believe that we have given good philosophical objections to the model that in no way impugn the truth of Christian belief, effectively undercutting Plantinga's assertion that there are no such objections.

#### IV

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that Plantinga had established that Christian belief is Plantinga-warranted if true. Notice that its being so warranted is not something to which the believer has internal cognitive access, for she does not have internal cognitive access to whether it is 'produced by cognitive processes functioning properly in an appropriate environment according to a design plan successfully aimed at the production of true belief'.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, if any belief is Plantinga-warranted, this would be an objective fact about it, one no more internally cognitively accessible to the believer than the truth of the belief itself. Hence, its being Plantinga-warranted could not serve the epistemic function of being an indicator to the believer of the probable truth of her belief.

This point has important implications for whether Plantinga accomplished one of his main goals in *Warranted Christian Belief*, namely, to refute the 'widespread idea' that, whether or not Christian belief is true, it nevertheless lacks positive epistemic status.<sup>29</sup> Plantinga sought to show that atheologians cannot reasonably claim that Christian belief lacks warrant or other kinds of positive epistemic status and yet remain neutral about the truth of Christian belief.<sup>30</sup> But given the internal cognitive inaccessibility of Plantinga warrant, we suggest that, even if Plantinga had shown that Christian belief is Plantinga-warranted if true, that result would have been of little or no interest to most atheologians. Indeed, Plantinga's thesis is not a major focus of atheological attacks on Christian belief. Rather, for the most part, atheologians argue that Christian belief does not have a positive epistemic status indicative of its truth and then go on to infer from this that it is highly likely (other things being equal) that Christian belief is false.<sup>31</sup> That is, they *argue* for its *falsity* by trying to show that Christian belief fails to have a positive epistemic status indicative (other things being equal) of its probable truth.

*This* common atheological challenge to Christian belief cannot be defeated by showing that, if Christian belief is true, then it has a kind of warrant (Plantinga warrant) that cannot serve as an indicator to any human person of the probable truth of such belief. In short, whether Christian belief has Plantinga warrant if true is irrelevant to a typical atheological objection that Christian belief cannot have positive epistemic status indicative of probable truth and is *therefore* probably false.<sup>32</sup>

It should be noted that Plantinga attempts to rebut other important atheological objections. These objections, which adduce putative defeaters of positive epistemic status for Christian belief, are ones atheologians often use in trying to show that Christian belief is probably false. Plantinga's critical analyses of these atheological

arguments are always interesting and frequently convincing, and they constitute an important contribution to Christian apologetics. While we thus acknowledge the considerable value of Plantinga's work to 'defeat defeaters' of Christian belief, what we have shown in this paper are some important areas where work remains to be done in defending along Plantingan lines the intellectual respectability of Christian belief.<sup>33</sup>

## Notes

1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), abbreviated as 'WCB' in subsequent notes.

2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

3 See WCB, p. 285.

4 *Ibid.*

5 WCB, p. 168.

6 WCB, pp. 168–169.

7 WCB, p. 170.

8 *Ibid.*

9 WCB, p. 241. Before presenting this model, Plantinga sets out his 'Aquinas/Calvin' model for warranted *theistic* belief—a model based on the view, shared by Aquinas and Calvin, that human beings were created with a capacity for natural knowledge of God, the *sensus divinitatis*, which has been damaged by sin. See WCB, Chpts. 6 and 7.

10 Christian belief is belief whose propositional content 'is just the central teachings of the gospel; it is contained in the intersection of the great Christian creeds' (WCB, p. 248).

11 WCB, p. 284.

12 WCB, pp. 249–252, 256–258, 284–285.

13 WCB, pp. 245–247, 256.

14 WCB, pp. 246 n.10, 256–257.

15 WCB, p. 250.

16 WCB, pp. 246 n.10, 258–259.

17 WCB, p. 251.

18 WCB, pp. 251–252.

19 WCB, pp. 280–289.

20 WCB, pp. 280–281.

21 WCB, pp. 281–282.

22 WCB, p. 285.

23 WCB, pp. 169–170.

24 See WCB, pp. 242 and 285.

25 See WCB, pp. 263–265.

26 WCB, p. 284.

27 Note that our objection is not Pelagian. To insist that we remain separate persons in our dealings with God does not entail the Pelagian denial of the necessity of special divine grace for our justification and salvation. Moreover, nothing we have said is inconsistent with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit; what we deny is that the Holy Spirit becomes a part of us or a part of our cognitive equipment when He indwells in us.

28 Since Christian belief does not entail the extended A/C model, the Holy Spirit's revealing to us the truth of Christian belief does not entail that the Holy Spirit reveals to us that Christian belief is Plantinga-warranted. Indeed, even if the Holy Spirit revealed to us that Christian belief is warranted, given that Plantinga's account is not the only possible account of the warrant of Christian belief, it would not follow that the Holy Spirit revealed to us that Christian belief is Plantinga-warranted. Plantinga would be making a highly implausible and contentious claim if he asserted that, in revealing to us the truth of Christian belief, the Holy Spirit reveals to us that it is Plantinga-warranted.

29 WCB, p. 242.

30 WCB, pp. xii, 242.

31 Generally, atheological challenges to Christian belief are implicit in atheological challenges to the positive epistemic status and truth of theism. Obviously, if theism cannot have a strong positive epistemic status, then neither can Christian belief; if theism is false, then so is Christian belief. As evidence for our claim that atheologians typically argue along the lines described in the text, this sampling from the literature will have to suffice:

'[T]he weakness of our evidence of God is not a sign that God is hidden; it is a revelation that God does not exist.... The weakness of evidence for theism, I maintain, is itself evidence against it' (J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* [Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1993], pp. 1–2).

'I have shown that if we take seriously the evidence at our disposal, we can infer that the theistic God does not exist' (Michael Martin, 'Atheistic Teleological Arguments,' in R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman (eds.), *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992], p. 56. A quotation from Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* [Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990]).

'The arguments are the only way to establish theism, and they must be judged by the usual standard of evidence.... [I]f they fail, there is no alternative to atheism.... [W]e need not have a proof that God does not exist in order to justify atheism. Atheism is obligatory in the absence of any evidence for God's existence' (Michael Scriven, *Primary Philosophy* [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966], pp. 102–103).

'The balance of probabilities...comes out strongly against the existence of a god.... There is...no easy way of defending religion once it is admitted that the literal, factual, claim that there is a god cannot be rationally sustained' (J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments For and Against the Existence of God* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982], p. 253).

'[I]t follows from my arguments concerning evil and evolution that, other evidence held equal, naturalism is very much more probable than theism. And since naturalism and theism are alternative hypotheses—they cannot both be true—this implies that, other evidence held equal, it is highly likely that theism is false' (Paul Draper, 'Evolution and the Problem of Evil,' in Louis Pojman (ed.), *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, 3rd ed. [Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1998], p. 229).

'The abundance of cases of prima facie superfluous evil thus provides very strong evidence against the existence of God.... [T]he most important question for philosophy of religion is not whether belief in God is rational but whether that belief is true.... The analytic philosophy of religion offers theists the cold comfort that their beliefs cannot be proven irrational. However, when it comes to philosophical argumentation about the truth of theism, game, set, and match go to the atheists' (Keith M. Parsons, *God and the Burden of Proof: Plantinga, Swinburne, and the Analytic Defense of Theism* [Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989], pp. 129, 146, 147).

32 A defender of Plantinga might reply that, when atheologians argue that Christian belief does not have a strong epistemic status, they typically assume that in order to possess such a status a belief must be held on the basis of evidence or arguments that indicate (other things being equal) that the belief is probably true. Plantinga has famously attacked this 'evidentialist' assumption elsewhere—for example, in his 'Reason and Belief in God' Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (eds.), *Faith and Rationality* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 16–93. So, it might be argued, he cannot be faulted here for not criticizing a view he has taken on in a number of other writings.

We would respond by observing that our point is that most atheologians could readily grant that, if Christian belief is true, then it may well have *Plantinga* warrant in the way his model describes. The concession would have no bearing on their view that Christian belief is probably false because it cannot have an epistemic status indicative of probable truth to anyone. In other words, if Plantinga's 'model' strategy were successful, few if any atheologians would be disturbed, whereas they *would* be disturbed if they were forced to concede that his case against evidentialism succeeded.

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PIERRE LE MORVAN  
*The College of New Jersey, USA*

DANA RADCLIFFE  
*Syracuse University, USA*