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1

ON BELIEVING AND KNOWING

Does Knowledge Require Certainty?

Dear Dr. Craig,

I have been studying the defense of the Christian faith for the better part of six months now. I acknowledge that six months is not a vast amount of time; however there has been one idea that I have not been able to surmount or give a dispute when brought up in conversation or debate. Many people, some Christians included, plead intellectual ignorance as it applies to knowing anything about life, the universe, or logic. They state that since every possible option has not been explored that nothing can be said for certain. Since nothing can be said for certain, all of the premises that you pose may seem true to us, but we cannot say they are absolutely true. If they cannot be proven absolutely true, then there is no reason to believe them, and the argument dies right there.

It is becoming increasingly frustrating and disheartening to begin to speak to someone based on logic that is accepted and proven, and then be stopped before a discussion can even begin. For instance, in the Kalam cosmological argument, the first premise states: "Everything that begins to exist, has a cause." But many people question that premise due to the fact that we humans have not traveled the extent of the universe to conclude that premise. Because we have not explored the possibilities of the rest of the universe, it is impossible to base something off of an idea that may or may not be true in the whole universe.

I am sure that you have heard this before in debates, this idea of uncertainty of anything. I am very unsure of how to proceed in talking to people when they think this way. What advice would you give for responding to these objections?

Christopher
(country not specified)

Dr. Craig's Response

The folks you mention, Christopher, are victims of an unjustified and ultimately self-defeating skepticism.

INSIGHT

Notice the swift and poignant diagnosis. It's important to get at the assumptions that drive a claim, an argument, or a methodology. Here is a good example of this being done in this particular context. The rest of Dr. Craig's answers not only answer Christopher's question but attempt to help him "see" philosophically.

Notice that they equate knowledge with certainty. If you're not certain that some proposition p is true, then you do not know that p . But what justification is there for that assumption? I know that I have a head, for example. But I could be a brain in a vat of chemicals being stimulated by a mad scientist to think that I have a body. Does this mere possibility imply that I do not know that I have a head? If your friends answer, "Yes," ask them for their justification for thinking that knowledge requires certainty. *Anything* they say, you can reply to by asking, "Are you certain of that?" If they say, "No," then they don't know that knowledge requires certainty. If they say, "Yes," then it's not true after all that we can't know anything about life, the universe, or logic.

Skepticism, ironically, draws its life's blood from claims to have a good deal of knowledge. For example, your friends claim to know, "Since every possible option has not been explored, nothing can be said for certain." That statement is itself a claim to knowledge! (A claim that is patently false, but never mind!) How do they know that? Or again, how do they know that "Since nothing can be said for certain, we cannot say that your premises are absolutely true"? This is a claim to knowledge (again, funnily enough, a false claim). Or how about the claim, "If the premises cannot be proven absolutely true, then there is no reason to believe them"? How do they know that? (Again, this seems patently false, but leave that aside.) Where do these skeptics come up with all this knowledge?

And if we cannot know anything about logic, how can they reason:

1. Since every possible option has not been explored, nothing can be said for certain.
2. Since nothing can be said for certain, all of the premises that you pose may seem true to us, but we cannot say they are absolutely true.

3. If they cannot be proven absolutely true, then there is no reason to believe them.

That looks to me for all the world like the premises for the logical inference form called Hypothetical Syllogism! But if that inference rule is not true, then no conclusion follows from (1-3) and we have no reason to doubt my original argument.

The fundamental problem with skepticism is that it presupposes that in order to know p , you must know that you know p . But if I can know some truth without knowing how it is that I know it, then the nerve of skepticism is severed. The skeptic actually is making a very radical claim, for which he cannot provide any justification without pulling the rug from beneath his own feet.

Skepticism is thus strangely presumptuous and self-defeating. It relies on our having knowledge of some very non-obvious claims. The skeptic cannot provide any justification of those claims, lest his view becomes self-referentially incoherent; yet without them his skepticism collapses, for then his lack of certainty does not imply that he has a lack of knowledge.

On How to Confront the Challenge of Apathism

After just one visit to your fine *reasonablefaith.org*, I'm reasonably sure that I can demonstrate to the atheist that his position is untenable. However, I've recently come across a person who describes himself as an *apathist*. After a little research, I find that all of the arguments that I can come up with will be responded by, "Your God's not relevant, and it doesn't matter to me."

This guy may be a lost cause; however, he has a large following. How can I confidently present the case for God any time a discussion that touches Christianity, or any other faith for that matter, on his site?

Thanks for your time.

Mike

Dr. Craig's Response

This is the second time this week that I've heard someone use this solecism to describe his views on the existence of God. Must be the newest trend among unbelievers!

"Apatheism" (presumably from "apathy" + "theism") characterizes people who just don't care whether or not God exists. As such, apatheism is not a truth claim and so can be neither true nor false. It asserts nothing and denies nothing. It is merely an attitude or a psychological state of indifference with respect to God's existence.

It follows that the apatheist has nothing to offer by way of refutation of your arguments for God's existence. In response to your case, he merely says, "I don't care." The soundness of your arguments remains unaffected by his lack of interest. So you can continue to present your arguments confidently, knowing that his apathy in no way calls into question the truth of your premises or the validity of your inferences.

In fact, it would be interesting to see what your friend would say if you were to respond to his apatheism by saying, "I realize that you don't care whether or not God exists. But do you think He does exist? Since it doesn't matter to you, you can be totally objective. So what do you think? Is there a God?" He may reveal that he's really an atheist or agnostic after all, and then you can ask him for his reasons for believing as he does.

On the other hand, if he merely continues to repeat that he just doesn't care, say to him, "Hmm, that's odd! Even most atheists recognize that God's existence would make a tremendous difference to mankind. Why don't you care?"

At this point he's got to say something like your friend's remark: "Your God's not relevant, and it doesn't matter to me." Now, this response is astonishing. To be relevant is to have practical consequences, to make a difference. To my mind, anybody who thinks Christianity is irrelevant either is using the word "irrelevant" in an idiosyncratic sense or else, frankly, is just not a very deep thinker. (Of course, if Christianity is not true, then it's not relevant. But then, presumably, the reason it doesn't matter to him is not because it's irrelevant but because it's not true. But I find it bewildering that anyone could think that Christianity might be true and yet be irrelevant.) To the superficial person Christianity may not *seem* relevant because he never thinks to ask the deep questions about life.

So invite him to think about the question, "*IF* Christianity were true, what consequences would it have for your life? What difference would it make?" I think that if Christianity is true, then it is hugely relevant to our lives. I've tried to deal with this question in my talks

and writing on “The Absurdity of Life without God.”¹ Let me, therefore, simply list six ways in which Christianity is relevant if true.

1. If Christianity is true, there is meaning to your life.
2. If Christianity is true, there are objective moral values and duties in life.
3. If Christianity is true, there is a purpose to your life.
4. If Christianity is true, there is hope for deliverance from the shortcomings of our finite existence, such as suffering, aging, and death.
5. If Christianity is true, there is forgiveness for all the wrong things you have done.
6. If Christianity is true, you have the opportunity of a personal relationship with God and eternal happiness.

Given all these wonderful benefits, it seems to me utterly imperative to find out whether Christianity is true. But that imperative is incompatible with an attitude of apatheism.

The challenge of apatheism, then, is not philosophical but psychological. The question is how we can get folks interested in the question of God. By showing them the stark contrast in the respective consequences of atheism and of Christianity for human beings, we perhaps motivate them to take seriously the question of whether or not the biblical God exists.

But since the challenge of apatheism is psychological, the best strategy for dealing with it is not intellectual but relational. Become a true friend to the atheist, show that you care for him as an end in himself, and in time your genuine love for him will probably be more

INSIGHT

Notice the quotable wisdom here. It is reminiscent of what Joan Chittister says: “Superficial people are those who simply go along without a question in the world—asking nothing, troubled by nothing, examining nothing. Whatever people around them do, they do, too. That’s a sad and plastic life—routine and comfortable maybe, but still sad” (*Seeing with Our Souls*, 79). One wonders if atheism might very well be ripe for a kind of easy group think. Note Dr. Craig’s wise advice at the end of his answer when he talks about the “best strategy” with the self-identified atheist.

1. Readers can access Dr. Craig’s article for free by visiting ReasonableFaith.org (<http://bit.ly/lifewithoutgod>).

effective than any rational apologetic you can give him. Remember: the challenge here is simply getting him to *care* about the question. That is more likely to occur as a result of your friendship than as a result of your arguments.

I strongly suspect that the self-styled apatheist is usually just a lazy atheist. He really thinks that there is no God but just can't be bothered to justify his viewpoint. He doesn't care because he thinks it isn't true.

On Common Sense, Intuitions, and the Limits of Reason

Dear Dr. Craig,

I am an atheist but still a big fan of yours. I always defend you against *dumb internet atheists* who never bother to read anything yet think they can ridicule a man with two PhDs and two dozen books.

You defend the classic God proofs so well. But I think you are relying on commonsense and intuition too much in this day and age. We are not in an age where we can be confident that the laws of reason are the same as the laws of reality, like people in the time of Aristotle believed. If that were the case, we would never have had to abandon Aristotelian physics. It sounded perfectly intuitive but turned out to be false even on the simple idea of inertia, which is a principle that our brains will just not accept because of how we are wired, apparently.

So we can just see how reason is limited in understanding physics, then how much more would it be limited in understanding the creation and God? When thinking about the beginning of time and about creation and God, our reason actually generates contradictory ideas. It is not satisfied with the idea that the past should be infinite, yet at the same time not with the idea that time has a beginning either. They both sound absurd and we are forced to believe the opposite, yet its opposite is also equally absurd. Furthermore reason demands that the causal chain to the past should not go on forever, but it cannot really make sense of the very idea of a "first cause" either. And also it demands that contingent things must ultimately be explained by a necessary being, but

it finds the very idea of a “necessary being” incoherent at the same time. It wants to have God as the creator of time, yet it cannot comprehend the idea that there can be an agent that acts to create, yet has no time dimension of his own, while at the same time in our own experience we can act precisely because we are in time; it is what makes any action possible in the first place.

These examples should be an indicator that we shouldn't really pursue our intuitions to their logical conclusions beyond the limits of the natural world. Because reason wants to follow the train of thought to the end, but apparently it is trying to deal with a realm that doesn't work in human logic after a point. We may feel we are onto something, but that is just an illusion, and we shouldn't take such feelings seriously.

I will admit that atheism comes with its own problems. It is obvious from how we atheists have to either accept positivism or postmodernism and they both have fatal problems. Postmodernism is self-refuting as you explain in your great book *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*. And positivism apparently is just logically immature and on its way to postmodernism if one has to be consistent. Wittgenstein matured and abandoned his positivism to become a postmodernist. And that is the end of the road.

So it seems the debate between atheism and theism is a stalemate. But if you still say that I must reject atheism because it ends up in the absurdity of postmodernism and I must, therefore, adopt its negation that is theism, well, then I will have to remind you of fatal problems in your worldview such as JEDP theories for the origin of Torah and the academic success of Darwinism which demands acceptance.

Best Regards

KS

Turkey

Dr. Craig's Response

I really appreciate your interesting question, KS, and especially sticking up for me in your atheist forums!

As I read your letter, I thought, *Wow, this sounds just like a good Kantian!* (Have you read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* [1781]? Your arguments are echoes of his!) Now, scarcely any philosophers today are Kantians with respect to reason's ability to deliver to us important truths about reality. Since the demise of Verificationism in the mid-twentieth century, metaphysics, despite Kant's strictures, has been booming once again. That suggests that there must be something wrong with your argument. So let's talk about it.

INSIGHT

Notice what Dr. Craig is doing. He's contextualizing the perspective suggested by KS. This is important to do where possible in order to help people gain an appreciation of a broader discussion related to their questions. For this reason, knowing some history can be worthwhile for helping people understand what it is they are claiming.

First, it seems to me that we have no choice but to take common sense and intuition as our starting points. I very strongly suspect that even those who claim to place no stock in common sense and intuition in fact rely on them all the time with respect to unconscious metaphysical assumptions. So when a philosophical viewpoint flies in the face of common sense and intuition (e.g., that the external world does not exist), then we may justly demand a very powerful argument in favor of that viewpoint. In the absence of some defeater of what common sense and intuition tell us, we are rightly skeptical of that viewpoint and perfectly rational to reject it. So while the deliverances of common sense and intuition are certainly defeasible and may on occasion need revision, still they are an indispensable starting point that should not be lightly abandoned.

Are the laws of reason and the laws of reality the same, as people in Aristotle's time believed? Nothing has happened since the time of Aristotle that has undermined the truths of logic or logic's applicability to the world. Aristotle's logic is called syllogistic logic. He identified valid argument forms which are still recognized today, e.g., All *As* are *Bs*; no *Bs* are *Cs*; therefore, no *As* are *Cs*. This is an undeniably valid pattern of reasoning. The principal advance of modern logic over Aristotle's is that modern logicians came to realize that the premises of syllogistic reasoning like "All *As* are *Bs*" have themselves a logical structure which Aristotle's logic failed to disclose. A statement like "All *As* are *Bs*" has in modern sentential logic (the logic of sentences) the structure of a conditional: "For any item *x*, if *x* is an *A*, then *x* is a *B*." This allows us to make inferences that Aristotle's syllogistic logic cannot express, e.g., "Whatever begins to exist has a cause; the universe began to exist; therefore, the universe has a cause."

Formal logic has become a discipline of incredible technical precision and rigor, akin to mathematics. Indeed, formal logic often goes by the name “mathematical logic.” There is nothing in the advance of this discipline that should lead us to doubt reason’s ability to make valid inferences about reality. Indeed, the development of subdisciplines like modal logic (the logic dealing with the necessary and the possible) and counterfactual logic (dealing with subjunctive conditional statements) has been a great asset in our being able to reason more carefully and rigorously when doing metaphysics.

Don’t confuse Aristotelian logic with Aristotle’s physics! Aristotle was not only a great philosopher but a natural scientist as well. As you might expect, his scientific work has been superseded by subsequent science, as most sophisticated instruments for probing the physical world have developed. As science advanced in our understanding of nature’s laws, Aristotelian physics was replaced by Newtonian physics, which was in turn replaced by Einstein’s physics, which will soon, we expect, be superseded by a quantum gravitational unified physics. In each successive scientific revolution, the earlier science is not simply abandoned; rather its truths are recast and preserved in the theory that supersedes it and its inaccuracies abandoned.

I hope you can see that none of this gives any cause to doubt the efficacy of human reason in knowing reality; quite the contrary, this is testimony to the incredible power of human reason!

The lesson here for the natural theologian is that he needs to be scientifically literate and to keep abreast of current discoveries and new theories in science. For that reason I have striven to be responsible in this regard. I want to have a theology that is scientifically informed and so to present an integrated perspective on reality.

Now, you remind us quite rightly that when it comes to subjects like God and creation, we are doing metaphysics, not physics (though physics may provide evidence in support of premises in a metaphysical argument leading logically to a conclusion which is of theological significance). So if we have plausibly true premises that imply by the standard rules of logic a conclusion of theological significance, why should we resist that conclusion?

Here’s where your Kantianism enters the picture. You assert, “*When thinking about the beginning of time and about creation and God, our reason actually generates contradictory ideas.*” You’re claiming that reason leads us into antinomies and so cannot be trusted. I have responded to this Kantian claim.² KS, if you’re serious about getting your reservations resolved,

2. See, for example, “Appendix 2: The Kalam Cosmological Argument and the Thesis of Kant’s First Antinomy,” in Dr. Craig’s *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* (London: MacMillan, 1979).

please read that section. I show that there is no antinomy because there is nothing incoherent about a beginning of time. Kant thought that in order for time to have a beginning, there had to be a time before time during which nothing existed. That is a mistake. All that is required is that there was a time that was not preceded by any prior time. Far from being incomprehensible, this is precisely the concept of a beginning to time that is used in contemporary astrophysics. For example, the agnostic cosmologist Sean Carroll characterizes cosmological models that feature a beginning of the universe by saying, “there was a time such that there was no earlier time.”³

Similarly, there’s no problem about postulating a Creator or first cause who exists timelessly sans the universe. Again, Carroll uses precisely this notion with respect to a boundary condition on space-time: “There is no logical or metaphysical obstacle to completing the conventional temporal history of the universe by including an atemporal boundary condition at the beginning.”⁴ God’s eternal, atemporal state is, as it were, such a boundary condition to time. God’s act of creating the universe is simultaneous with the universe’s coming into being. So God is atemporal sans creation and temporal since creation. So where’s the problem?

As for the argument from contingent being to a metaphysically necessary being, what is the difficulty supposed to be? Many philosophers think that abstract objects like numbers and other mathematical objects exist necessarily. So where is the incoherence in the idea of a necessary being? It’s a being that exists in every broadly logically possible world. (Here the advances in modal logic that I spoke of earlier actually help us to better understand this notion of a metaphysically necessary being.) So what’s the objection?

These pseudo-antinomies thus do not support the radical conclusion that “*we shouldn’t really pursue our intuitions to their logical conclusions beyond the limits of the natural world.*” Indeed, when you assert, “*reason is trying to deal with a realm that doesn’t work in human logic after a point. We may feel we are onto something, but that is just an illusion,*” we may justifiably turn the tables and ask you, “How do you know that? How, on your view, can you know anything about what that realm is like? How do you know human logic doesn’t work there?”

3. “Does the Universe Need God?” in *The Blackwell Companion to Science and Christianity*. James B. Stump and Alan G. Padgett, eds. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012). For an audio discussion of Carroll’s article listen to Dr. Craig’s series of podcasts at ReasonableFaith.org (<http://bit.ly/RFPodcasts>). “Is Atheism Growing at the Expense of Theism” (7/16/2012), “Does Reason Lead to Atheism or Theism” (7/23/2012).

4. Ibid.

Indeed, how can logic ‘not work?’” KS, you, like Kant before you, are in the self-refuting position of making metaphysical claims yourself!

The lesson here is not that we should just quit thinking but that we should think even harder. Listen, KS, you’re not at the end of the road by a long shot. Even for an atheist, your choices are not limited to Positivism and Postmodernism. But why stick with atheism? Theism offers an intellectually expansive and richly rewarding view, not to speak of its spiritual benefits.

And, KS, what shall I say in response to your final paragraph? “C’mon Man!” You know better than that. You can be a theist and a Christian and accept the documentary hypothesis of the Pentateuch as well as a Darwinian theory of evolution, if you think that’s where the evidence leads.⁵

How Is Belief in God Properly Basic?

Dr. Craig,

I have some questions about Reformed Epistemology and your view on the witness of the Holy Spirit.

Following the lead of Alvin Plantinga, you try to argue that classical foundationalism is self-refuting because the criterion used by classical foundationalism (“only propositions that are self-evident or incorrigible are properly basic”) for discerning properly basic beliefs and beliefs derived from properly basic beliefs is itself neither properly basic nor derived. You say it is not properly basic because, using classical foundationalism’s own criterion, it is neither self-evident nor incorrigible. But your assertion that the criterion cannot be demonstrated by using evidence is a bit hasty. After all, you have not shown that the criterion used in classical foundationalism is incoherent; all you’ve shown is that we simply lack any evidence for it at the moment, but as you know, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. And unlike the self-refuting criterion used in logical positivism, the one in classical foundationalism can at least be verified in principle. Furthermore,

5. For more on this topic, see the questions on “Evolutionary Theory and Theism” and “Who Speaks for Science?” (pages 238–48.)

appealing to Reformed Epistemology to escape this does not help either because the criterion used by Reformed epistemologists (“only propositions that are self-evident, incorrigible, or appropriately grounded are properly basic”) is itself not properly basic and, using Plantinga’s hasty reasoning, is not evidentially supported either. So Reformed Epistemology does not do anything to alleviate the problem. Given this, should not one also reject Reformed Epistemology as self-refuting as well?

Second, there are better criteria available than the ones used either by the classical foundationalist or the Reformed epistemologist, particularly universal sanction. According to universal sanction, a belief is properly basic if it is pragmatically indispensable. The nice part about this criterion is that it allows for a type of evidentialism which avoids all of Plantinga’s counterexamples. For instance, under universal sanction, memory beliefs, belief in the reality of the external world, belief in other minds, and so on, are properly basic because doubting or denying them would make living a normal human life impossible. We need these beliefs in order to live happy and fulfilling lives. Now, interestingly enough, universal sanction effectively prevents any theistic beliefs from being properly basic, for it is pragmatically conceivable that one lives a happy life without belief in God. I think Sennett is spot-on in his analysis here. The reason we accept belief in other minds, the external world, and our memories is not because we somehow “know” that they are true; it is all psychological, for we desperately want these beliefs to be true because we know that it would be impossible to live a fulfilling life without them. Now, Plantinga would probably say that universal sanction is self-refuting, but there are problems with that strategy as mentioned earlier. Would you now agree that universal sanction is superior to Plantinga’s criterion?

Third, in the context of Plantinga’s work, a properly basic belief is a basic belief that has not been attacked with any defeaters; once a defeater is given, though, the properly basic belief becomes simply a basic one. At this point, one can either relinquish the basic belief or hold on to it in the case that she can find arguments with which to defeat the original defeater, which would then restore the belief’s proper basicity. On your view, though, the witness of the Holy Spirit is a properly basic belief AND an intrinsic defeater-defeater, so if someone were to offer a defeater to Christianity that you could not answer, would your belief in God be basic or properly basic?

Next, when you say that one is rational to believe in God on the basis of the witness of the Holy Spirit, do you mean rational in the sense pertaining to justification or warrant? If by “rational” you mean “justified,” then you have really shown nothing. Muslims, Hindus, and atheists are all rational under this definition since they are within their epistemic rights. Nothing has been done to show that Christianity is true. On the other hand, if by “rational” you mean “warranted” in the Plantingian sense, then you need to explain why other properly basic beliefs that are warranted turn out to be false (like faulty memory beliefs).

It is worth noting that the relationship between properly basic non-theistic beliefs and their grounds are vastly different from the relationship between supposedly properly basic theistic beliefs and their grounds. There is always a certain correspondence between the content of an experience and the content of a belief grounded by that experience. For instance, my feeling of pain grounds the belief that I am in pain, not some unrelated belief like “evolution is true” or “a=a.” However, according to Plantinga, experiencing guilt, happiness, and danger or reading the Bible serves as grounds for properly basic theistic belief. But surely you notice the disparity here, Dr. Craig! What Plantinga is asking us to do is to conclude, on the basis of a few emotions, that a necessary, eternal, self-existing, omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, omnipresent, omnitemporal, unembodied mind created the universe out of nothing and regularly interacts with humans and has revealed himself to man in the form of Jesus of Nazareth, who was born of a virgin, performed numerous miracles, was crucified, descended into hell, rose from the dead, ascended to heaven, and now sits at the right hand of God! The belief is so unrelated to its alleged grounds that one can only wonder how Plantinga gets away with this! Surely you don’t believe that belief in the God mentioned above is solely grounded by a mere religious experience, right?

Finally, Plantinga’s model presupposes that Christianity is true. Plantinga essentially is defending the proposition: If Christianity is true, then Christian belief is warranted (as explained by his model). But Plantinga never gives any support for the antecedent of that material conditional; he just says that demonstrating the antecedent is not his project. But if that is so, then Plantinga really has not shown much other than that *de jure* objections to Christianity fail. But I fail to see how his model shows how a Christian can rationally

believe that Christianity is true. Do you hold to this view? You seem to argue in the opposite direction of Plantinga: If there is a witness of the Holy Spirit, then Christianity is true. Do you believe that THAT conditional is true?

Thank you,
Timaeus
(country not specified)

Dr. Craig's Response

In assessing Alvin Plantinga's theory of religious knowledge, it's important to keep clearly in mind what his aims are. As he describes his project, it is twofold: First, a public project aimed at showing that there is no objection to Christian belief unless Christian beliefs can be shown to be false and, second, a private project aimed to provide the Christian community with a plausible account of how Christian belief is warranted.

With regard to the public project, Plantinga wants to show that there is no good reason to think Christian belief is unjustified, irrational, or unwarranted unless it can be shown that Christian beliefs are false. Some readers might think, "Well, of course!" But they need to understand that at least until recently it has been argued that even if Christianity were true, we would not be justified in believing it. Usually this is because it is claimed that there is a lack of evidence for Christian beliefs such as the belief that God exists. Plantinga disagrees with that assertion; he thinks that the theistic arguments make it more probable than not that God exists. But he wants to defend the view that Christian belief can be justified, rational, and warranted even in the absence of evidence. In order to show this he develops a model for how one might be warranted in Christian belief on the basis of an innate cognitive faculty designed by God to produce belief in Him under certain circumstances and on the basis of the witness of the Holy Spirit to the great truths of the gospel contained in Scripture.

Plantinga doesn't claim to show that his model is true but merely that for all we know, it *may* be true, and, moreover, if Christianity *is* true, then something like the model is very likely to be true. If he succeeds in establishing these modest claims, he will have shown that there is no objection to Christian belief apart from demonstrating that Christianity is false, or, as he puts it, there is no *de jure* objection to Christian belief independent of a *de facto* objection.

So on Plantinga's view, belief in God can be (and he thinks should be) a properly basic belief not inferred on the basis of evidence. Now, as you note, Timaeus, the classical foundationalist has traditionally held that only self-evident or incorrigible beliefs are properly basic. Plantinga doesn't deny that such beliefs are properly basic, but he presents two considerations to prove that so restricting properly basic beliefs is untenable:

- (i) If only self-evident and incorrigible propositions are properly basic, then we are all irrational, since we commonly accept numerous beliefs that are not based on evidence and that are neither self-evident nor incorrigible.
- (ii) The proposition *Only beliefs that are self-evident or incorrigible are properly basic* is not itself properly basic, since it is neither self-evident nor incorrigible. Therefore, if we are to believe this proposition, we must have evidence that it is true. But there is no such evidence.

ANSWERING THREE OBJECTIONS TO BELIEF IN GOD AS PROPERLY BASIC

Now, your first objection is that perhaps the evidence justifying this belief will be found. It's very difficult to see how that could possibly happen, Timaeus. It's hard to see what sort of evidence *could* justify such a view, especially in light of (i). If we take an inductive survey of beliefs we think are properly basic, there will be no agreement that they are so restricted. But the more important point is that given the admitted *present* absence of such evidence, it is currently irrational to accept classical foundationalism. Therefore, it is impotent as an objection to including belief in God as properly basic.

You then assert that the criterion used by Reformed epistemologists is itself not properly basic or evidentially supported. But this is a misunderstanding. Reformed epistemologists like Plantinga don't offer any criterion of proper basicity. Plantinga eschews any search for such a criterion and suggests that if we want to see which beliefs are properly basic, the best we can do is just take an inductive survey of our beliefs, and he insists that the theist will include belief in God among such beliefs, even if unbelievers do not. So Reformed Epistemology is not self-refuting, since it doesn't offer any criterion of which beliefs are properly basic.

Your second objection is to offer another criterion for properly basic beliefs that would exclude belief in God as properly basic, namely, properly basic beliefs must be universally sanctioned. But this criterion falls prey to the same two objections raised by Plantinga. (i) There are a myriad of beliefs that we accept in a properly basic way that aren't universally

sanctioned. For example, my belief that I had scrambled eggs for breakfast is not pragmatically indispensable. Even if it were for me (which it's not), it certainly isn't for someone else who isn't I and didn't eat scrambled eggs for breakfast. Most of our properly basic beliefs are highly individualized and, therefore, not universally sanctioned. (If you relativize your criterion to individual persons, then you'll have to allow that for some people belief in God might be pragmatically indispensable!) (ii) The belief that only universally sanctioned beliefs are properly basic is not itself universally sanctioned. But neither is there any evidence that only universally sanctioned beliefs are properly basic. So this objection doesn't exclude the proper basicity of belief in God. Universal sanction is not superior to Plantinga's criterion, first, because Plantinga doesn't have a criterion, and second, because universal sanction falls prey to the above objections. (Not to mention the fact that on your view, while our beliefs may be properly basic, they don't seem to be really warranted, leaving us in almost utter skepticism!)

Third, as to the role of defeaters of properly basic beliefs, the notion of an intrinsic defeater-defeater is not mine, but Plantinga's. An intrinsic defeater-defeater is a belief that is so powerfully warranted that it defeats the putative defeater brought against it without any need of additional beliefs to come to the rescue. Plantinga gives the charming illustration of someone accused of a crime that he knows he didn't commit even though all the evidence is stacked against him. He is rational in believing in his own innocence despite the evidence that would rightly convince someone else that he is guilty. In application to the witness of the Holy Spirit, my claim is that God can so powerfully warrant Christian beliefs that they become intrinsic defeaters of the defeaters lodged against them, so that, yes, they remain both properly basic and warranted.

THE RATIONALITY OF THEISTIC BELIEF

When I say that one is rational to believe in God on the basis of the witness of the Holy Spirit, do I mean rational in the sense pertaining to justification or warrant? Read what Plantinga says in response to the "Son of Great Pumpkin" objection in *Warranted Christian Belief*. He is emphatic that justification is easy to achieve (even Voodoo epistemologists can be justified in their beliefs!) and that what he's talking about is warrant, that which turns true belief into knowledge. You complain, "Nothing has been done to show that Christianity is true." Ah, but Timaeus, that's no part of Plantinga's project! His aim, remember, is merely to show that for all we know, his model may be true. When you assert, "you need to explain why other properly basic beliefs that are warranted turn out to be false

(like faulty memory beliefs),” you err in thinking that such beliefs are warranted; they’re not. They may be *justified* in the sense that the person holding them is within his rational rights or exhibits no cognitive defect, but he’s not *warranted*.

As for the disparity of the conditions grounding properly basic beliefs, there’s no reason to think there has to be uniformity here. In any case you misconstrue the model when you say that “on the basis of a few emotions” Plantinga is asking us “to conclude” that such and such a being exists. You’re treating these experiences as something from which a belief is inferred, and that’s not the model. Rather, these experiences serve as triggers for the operation of this innate, God-given faculty which forms belief in God (and even then not necessarily including all the superlative theological attributes you mention, of which very few people are even aware). As for the content of Christian beliefs, you’re overlooking the role of Scripture in Plantinga’s model: it is through Scripture that we learn of the great truths you mention, and then the Holy Spirit commends these truths to us. We don’t just come up with them out of the blue; we read of them in Scripture. So, right, I and Plantinga do not think or propose that “belief in the God mentioned above is solely grounded by a mere religious experience.”

Finally, you’re correct that Plantinga claims that “if Christianity is true, then Christian belief is warranted.” You’re also correct that he “says that demonstrating the antecedent is not his project.” You then complain, “But if that is so, then Plantinga really has not shown much other than that *de jure* objections to Christianity fail.” Right, which is to admit that his public project has been a resounding success! No longer can unbelievers grumble that Christians are irrational, unjustified, or unwarranted in believing as they do in the absence of evidence. Unbelievers will have to come up with disproofs of Christian beliefs in order to show that such beliefs are irrational, unjustified, or unwarranted. So your next remark, Timaeus, just doesn’t make sense: “I fail to see how his model shows how a Christian can rationally believe that Christianity is true.” That’s exactly what you just admitted it *does* show, unless you’ve got some arguments you’ve not yet shared to show that Christianity is false.

Do I hold Plantinga’s view? That question takes us from his public project into his private project. Should I as a Christian adopt his model as a way of understanding how Christian beliefs are warranted? Here I do have some reservations. See my assessment in the chapter on Religious Epistemology in *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*. I’m inclined to place more emphasis on the witness of the Holy Spirit rather than on some innate cognitive faculty. Still, at the end of the day I think that Plantinga is right that if Christianity is true, then *something like the model* is very likely to be true. I also think that

“if there is a witness of the Holy Spirit, then Christianity is true.” And I think Plantinga would agree.

On Question-Begging and Appealing to the Holy Spirit

Dear Dr. Craig,

I’ve found that the relationship between reason and faith is one of the less understood aspects of Christianity; especially the aspect related to if we know that Christianity is true. When pressed to explain how you know that your experience of the Holy Spirit is veridical and not false (like the experience of Mormons or Muslim), you have replied: “The experience of the Spirit’s witness is self-authenticating for the person who really has it. The Spirit-filled Christian can know immediately that his claim to the Spirit’s witness is true despite the false claims made by persons adhering to other religions.”

It seems to me that your reply begs the question in favor of Christianity (or more specifically, in favor of Christians’ claims of having veridical experiences of the Holy Spirit) and against other religious people’s claims of having similar non-Christian experiences of God’s Spirit.

In other words, your reply assumes:

1. That Christianity is true (hence, the Holy Spirit actually exists as experienced by Christians)
2. That Christians have access to that truth and, therefore, that other non-Christian claims about God’s Spirit (or the claims of other religious people) are false.

But precisely what is at stake is whether Christianity is true or not (this is what we want to know) and, if it is the case, how could we KNOW it objectively (not purely through a subjective experience which, by itself, is equivalent to other subjective experiences of other non-Christian religious believers).

The question-begging nature of your explanation becomes more clear when you rhetorically ask: “How is the fact that other persons, like Muslims or Mormons, falsely

claim to experience a self-authenticating witness of God's Spirit relevant to my knowing the truth of Christianity via the Spirit's witness?"

True, if Christianity is true and the Holy Spirit exists, then the fact that other people falsely claim to experience God's Spirit is irrelevant to my knowing of the truth of Christianity.

But the problem is that we don't know in advance if Christianity is true or not (this is what we are trying to know!), so I cannot assume that MY experience of the Holy Spirit is the veridical one, and the experience of other people is the false one.

Can you expand in more detail on these questions please?

Best regards,

Mary

Dr. Craig's Response

Mary, this is an objection that, though understandable, is based on a failure to grasp correctly Alvin Plantinga's project in religious epistemology. Plantinga distinguishes between what he calls *de facto* and *de jure* objections to Christian belief. A *de facto* objection is one aimed at the truth of the Christian faith; it attempts to show that Christian truth claims are false. By contrast a *de jure* objection attempts to undermine Christian belief even if Christianity is, in fact, true.

Plantinga identifies three versions of the *de jure* objection: that Christian belief is unjustified, that it is irrational, and that it is unwarranted. Plantinga's aim is to show that all such *de jure* objections to Christian belief are unsuccessful, or, in other words, that Christian belief can be shown to be unjustified, irrational, or unwarranted only if it is shown that Christian beliefs are false. There is thus no *de jure* objection to Christian belief independent of a *de facto* objection.

To show this, Plantinga develops a model or theory of warranted Christian belief, that is to say, an account of how it is that we know the truth of various Christian truth claims. On behalf of his model Plantinga claims, not that it is true, but that

- (1) It is epistemically possible, that is to say, for all we know, it may be true;
- (2) If Christianity is true, there are no philosophical objections to the model;
- (3) If Christianity is true, then something like the model is very likely to be true.

According to Plantinga's model, God warrants to us the great truths of the gospel by means of the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. Such beliefs are for us properly basic beliefs grounded in (but not inferred from) the witness of the Holy Spirit.

Now, the point is, such a model may for all we know be true. Moreover, if Christianity is true, then, as you note, there is no problem with the model. Finally, I think that Plantinga is right that if Christianity is true, then something like his model is very likely to be true. So there is no *de jure* objection to Christian belief. The unbeliever who wants to argue that Christian belief is unjustified, irrational, or unwarranted has to present objections to the truth of the Christian faith. For if he doesn't, then for all he knows, Christianity may well be true, in which case there just is no problem with Christian belief.

None of this begs the question, I hope you can see. For the key claims are conditional. Neither of them assumes that Christianity actually is true.

Now, of course, a Muslim could make exactly similar claims about Islam, as Plantinga acknowledges. There is, therefore, no *de jure* objection to Muslim belief either.

So we'll naturally want to know, "Well, then, is Christianity true?" The Christian will say, "Yes." That raises a further question: "How do you know?" The Christian may answer, "Because I do experience the inner witness of the Holy Spirit." There's nothing circular here, anymore than in someone's reporting that he does experience the reality of the external world or the presence of other minds. If some solipsist said to me that he doesn't believe in the reality of the external world or other minds, that wouldn't do anything to defeat my beliefs. Even if he claimed that God was warranting to him his solipsistic beliefs in a properly basic way, that wouldn't do a thing to call my beliefs into question. He can claim what he wants; I know better.

INSIGHT

Notice the relevancy of *de jure* objections in an interreligious dialogue context. What can you appreciate about Dr. Craig's insight and its applicability to dialoguing with a very different religious and philosophical worldview?

Of course, the Muslim can say the same thing, and so we have a standoff. But here my distinction between knowing our faith to be true and showing it to be true becomes relevant. In order to show our Muslim friend that his beliefs are not properly basic, we can present *de facto* objections to the truth of Islam. Since he does not in fact have a genuine witness of the Holy Spirit to the truth of Islam, we can hope that his confidence will crack

under the force of the evidence and that he will come to see that his experience was either non-veridical or misinterpreted.

Again, the Muslim can say the same thing and so engage in Muslim apologetics aimed at providing *de facto* objections to Christianity. Great! Bring on the debate!