

INTRODUCTION REASON AND BELIEF

In previous chapters we have encountered arguments for and against the existence of God. While for Aquinas God's existence can be rationally demonstrated on the basis of certain empirical evidence (for example, the immediate experience that things move and are caused; see pp. I:73-76 above), for Hume the evidence of evil and suffering drives in the opposite direction, making it highly probable that no such God exists (see pp. 148-163 above). But there are also philosophers who sit in neither camp, and who regard all such debates about God's existence as inappropriate. So the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) argues that faith cannot be rationally justified: that religious belief requires a 'leap of faith', involving risk and passionate involvement, and that such a commitment cannot be obtained through intellectual assessments of proof and evidence. Kierkegaard's 'knight of faith' knows that his belief appears paradoxical and absurd, but the very absence of objective certainties makes the dynamic and inward character of his response all the more necessary. This position has come to be known as *fideism* (faith-ism), of which a modern variant is *Wittgensteinian fideism* (represented by Norman Malcolm, D.Z. Phillips, Peter Winch and Gareth Moore. See pp. II:169 above). As its name suggests, this is indebted to the later work of Wittgenstein – in particular his notion of language games – and highlights the unique character of religious language. Religious discourse is embedded in a form of life with its own rules and logic. Because they operate within a distinct language-game, the meaning of religious statements can only be evaluated from within their own practices and traditions and they are not, therefore, subject to the verificational techniques of scientific language. Once again concepts of 'proof' and 'evidence' are rendered ineffective, given the distinctive character of the religious subject-matter. This conclusion signals a significant shift of emphasis. The philosophical preoccupation is now less to do with the validity of theistic proofs and disproofs and more to do with whether it is necessary to have such arguments at all. In other words, the question now is: Is it rational to believe that God exists without evidence, without some kind of proof or demonstration of God's existence?

This question is at the forefront of modern theological debate, particularly since the advent of *Reformed Epistemology*, the leading exponents of which are Alvin Plantinga (b. 1932)*, Nicholas Wolterstorff (b. 1932), William P. Alston (b. 1921).* The movement's name, coined by Plantinga, recalls the Reformed tradition of Protestantism, and in particular the work of John Calvin (1509-1564), who argued that belief in God was an innate human disposition – a *divinitatis sensum* or 'sense of divinity' – planted in man by God himself but suppressed by the unnatural and sinful human situation. Reformed epistemologists develop this theme by claiming that human beings have an immediate and non-inferential knowledge of God, which may be triggered by

a wide variety of stimuli drawn from everyday experience (for example, the sky at night, sunlight on a flower). Such a belief they term a *properly basic belief*: it is rational but not justified by inference from evidence or argument. In this important respect, a *properly basic belief* stands on a par with those other beliefs which are similarly unjustified by other beliefs, and which thus form the foundation of all knowledge: i.e., our belief in other persons, an external world, and the past. In proposing that religious belief is a properly basic belief, reformed epistemologists are providing an answer to the so-called *evidentialist* challenge to theism.

1. *The evidentialist objection to belief in God.* Evidentialism is the view that rational beliefs require evidential support, and there are many evidentialists who are believers (Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, John Locke, William Paley, and more recently Wolfhart Pannenberg, William Lane Craig, Richard Swinburne and Robert Adams, to name but a few), all of whom in their various ways have attempted to show that belief in God is not irrational but justified by evidence and argument. But equally there are many evidentialists who are not believers, and here too the list is a long one (David Hume, W.K. Clifford,* Brand Blanshard, Bertrand Russell, J.L. Mackie, Michael Scriven, and many others). Their objection to religious belief is, not surprisingly, that all the theistic arguments thus far deployed are inadequate – perhaps the classic example in this respect being the Humean and Kantian rejection of the standard arguments for God’s existence (see I: Chapter 2, above) – and that accordingly religious belief must be deemed irrational because of this insufficiency.

Why do evidentialists on both sides share the view that the rationality of religious belief requires the support of evidence or argument? This is typically because they both subscribe to a theory of knowledge known as *classical foundationalism*. This is a theory about how our beliefs are justified (epistemic justification), and it makes two claims: (1) there are properly basic beliefs, which by definition do not depend on other beliefs; and (2) there are non-basic beliefs, which make up the bulk of our belief system, and which are justified by their relation to one or more basic beliefs. Expressed otherwise, foundationalists hold that: (1) a properly basic belief is non-inferential and (2) a non-basic belief is inferential. A basic belief is non-inferential, and thus properly basic and foundational, because it is self-evident (for example, a truth of mathematics or logic), incorrigible (that is, incapable of error, as with the belief in one’s own existence) or immediately evident to the senses (as with direct perception: ‘I see a tree outside’). All our other beliefs, to repeat, are non-basic and so derived beliefs, that is, dependent on beliefs that are properly basic: for example, the spelling of words being based on their spelling in a dictionary. The evidentialist challenge to religious belief can now be stated. Given that religious beliefs are neither self-evident, nor about one’s immediate introspective experience, nor evident to the senses, they cannot be properly basic beliefs. If they are not basic beliefs and do not possess what has been called ‘epistemic privilege’, they must be non-basic beliefs, and as such will be considered rational only if supported by evidence or argument. As Wolterstorff puts it succinctly: ‘No religion is acceptable unless rational, and no religion

is rational unless supported by evidence'.¹ For atheological philosophers, the absence of sufficient evidence means, therefore, that theistic belief is irrational, and that accordingly it is epistemologically irresponsible to adopt any position other than that of agnosticism or atheism.

2. *The Rejection of the Evidentialist Challenge.* Reformed epistemologists first focus on the association between evidentialism and classical foundationalism. This, they claim, has resulted in an overly narrow classification of what constitutes the class of properly basic beliefs, and has thus led to the illegitimate exclusion of theistic belief from that class. In support a number of arguments have been advanced, amongst which are: 1) that classical foundationalism's criteria for proper basicity are at best inconsistent and at worst incoherent; and 2) that the incorrigible, self-evident and evident to the senses criteria cannot therefore be the sole conditions of proper basicity. These criticisms allow Reformed Epistemology to advance to 3): that a person's rational system of belief – i.e., his entire 'noetic' structure, which is made up of both basic and non-basic beliefs – may include a belief in God which is not inferred from other beliefs but which is foundational. Accordingly the believer is acting entirely rationally, and within his epistemic rights, in beginning with a belief in God prompted by immediate and reliable experience, in accepting this belief as a properly basic belief, and in adopting this belief as a premise from which other conclusions may be inferred. In doing so the believer is proceeding on lines already familiar in areas of non-theistic and secular belief (for example, perceptual belief or belief in other minds). This similarity in procedure is sometimes called the 'parity argument', and underscores the fact that religious beliefs can resist the evidentialist challenge not by providing proof or argument but by revealing how religious belief, as a properly basic belief, fulfils all the requirements of our customary doxastic practices.

1. 'Introduction', *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, p.1983, p. 6.

4. MICHAEL MARTIN: FAITH AND FOUNDATIONALISM

Philosophical Summary. Michael Martin (b. 1932) is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the University of Boston. Martin's objections to Reformed Epistemology are set out in his *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (1990). Martin focuses on Plantinga's version and argues not only that his arguments against classical foundationalism fail but that his category of proper basicity leads to an extreme relativism, justifying any belief as rational, from voodoo beliefs to atheism itself. Martin also and more indirectly takes issue with Alston's analogy between religious and perceptual beliefs as being both properly basic: the difference here being that while with perception the justification for believing that X is properly basic depends on my perceptions cohering with the perceptions of others, in religious belief such uniformity is notoriously difficult to obtain. This latter point is extended by Gutting (see pp. II:237-243 below).

Bibliographical Summary. Primary Sources: Martin's *Atheism* (1990) is an extensive survey of all the major arguments for God's existence and a classic of modern atheistic literature. Martin's other writings, and in similar vein, include *The Impossibility of God* (2003), *Atheism, Morality and Meaning* (2002), *Theism vs. Atheism: The Internet Debate* (2000) and *The Case against Christianity* (1991). Amongst his many articles are 'Atheism', in *Philosophy of Education: An Encyclopedia*, (1996), 'The Absurdity of the Christian Life' (2000) and 'Three Arguments for Nonbelief' (2001). Martin is a significant contributor to the internet, and most of his essays on atheism are available there.

Michael Martin Faith and Foundationalism¹⁴

Following a long line of reformed thinkers – that is, thinkers influenced by the doctrine of John Calvin, Plantinga contends that traditional arguments for the existence of God are not needed for rational belief. He cites with approval Calvin's claim that God created humans in such a way that they have a strong tendency to believe in God. According to Plantinga, Calvin maintained:

Were it not for the existence of sin in the world human beings would believe in God to the same degree and with the same natural spontaneity that we believe in the existence of other persons, an external world, or the past. This is a natural human condition; it is because of our presently unnatural sinful condition that many of us find belief in God difficult or absurd. The fact is, Calvin thinks, one who does not believe in God is in an epistemically substandard position – rather like a man who does not believe that his wife exists, or thinks that she is like a cleverly constructed robot and has no thoughts, feelings, or consciousness.¹⁵

14. *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1990, pp. 268-278.

15. 'Religious Belief Without Evidence', *Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Louis Pojman,

Although this natural tendency to believe in God may be partially suppressed, Plantinga argues, it is triggered by ‘a widely realizable condition’.¹⁶ For example, it may be triggered ‘in beholding the starry heavens, or the splendid majesty of the mountains, or the intricate, articulate beauty of a tiny flower’.¹⁷ This natural tendency to accept God in these circumstances is perfectly rational. No argument for God is needed. Plantinga maintains that the best interpretation of Calvin’s views, as well as those of the other reformed thinkers he cites, is that they rejected classical foundationalism and maintained that belief in God can itself be a properly basic belief.

Surprisingly, Plantinga insists that although belief in God and belief about God’s attributes and actions are properly basic, for reformed epistemologists this does not mean that there are no justifying circumstances or that they are without grounds. The circumstances that trigger the natural tendency to believe in God and to believe certain things about God provide the justifying circumstances for belief. So although beliefs about God are properly basic, they are not groundless.¹⁸

How can we understand this? Plantinga draws an analogy between basic statements of religion and basic statements of perceptual belief and memory. A perceptual belief, he says, is taken as properly basic only under certain circumstances. For example, if I know that I am wearing rose-tinted glasses, then I am not justified in saying that the statement ‘I see a rose-colored wall before me’ is properly basic; and if I know that my memory is unreliable, I am not justified in saying that the statement ‘I remember that I had breakfast’ is properly basic. Although Plantinga admits that these conditions may be hard to specify, he maintains that their presence is necessary in order to claim that a perceptual or memory statement is basic. Similarly, he maintains that not every statement about God that is not based on argument or evidence should be considered properly basic. A statement is properly basic only in the right circumstances. What circumstances are right? Plantinga gives no general account, but in addition to the triggering conditions mentioned above, the right conditions include reading the Bible, having done something wrong, and being in grave danger. Thus if one is reading the Bible and believes that God is speaking to one, then the belief is properly basic.

Furthermore, Plantinga insists that although reformed epistemologists allow belief in God as a properly basic belief, this does not mean they must allow that anything at all can be a basic belief. To be sure, he admits that he and other reformed epistemologists have not supplied us with any criterion

Belmont, Calif., Wadsworth, 2nd edn, 1994, p.495.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, p.465.

18. ‘Is Belief in God Properly Basic?’, *Nous*, 15, 1981, p. 46.

of what is properly basic. He argues, however, that this is not necessary. One can know that some beliefs in some circumstances are not properly basic without having an explicitly formulated criterion of basicness. Thus Plantinga says that reformed epistemologists can correctly maintain that belief in voodoo or astrology or the Great Pumpkin is not a basic belief.

How is one to arrive at a criterion for being properly basic? According to Plantinga the route is ‘broadly speaking, *inductive*’. He adds, ‘We must assemble examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are obviously properly basic in the latter. . . . We must frame hypotheses as to the necessary and sufficient conditions of proper basicity and test these hypotheses by reference to these examples’.¹⁹

He argues that, using this procedure,

the Christian will of course suppose that belief in God is entirely proper and rational; if he does not accept this belief on the basis of other propositions, he will conclude that it is basic for him and quite properly so. Followers of Russell and Madelyn Murray O’Hare [*sic*] may disagree; but how is that relevant? Must my criteria, or those of the Christian community, conform to their examples? Surely not. The Christian community is responsible to *its* set of examples, not to theirs.²⁰

Evaluation of Plantinga’s Critique of Foundationalism

Recall that Plantinga argues that classical foundationalists are being self-referentially inconsistent. But as James Tomberlin has pointed out, since what is self-evident is relative to persons, a classical foundationalist (CF) could argue that (1) is self-evident²¹ and that if Plantinga were sufficiently attentive, the truth of (1) would become clear to him.²² Tomberlin argues that this response is similar to Calvin’s view that in beholding the starry heavens, the properly attuned theist senses the existence of God. As Tomberlin puts it: ‘If the theist maybe so attuned, why can’t the classical foundationalist enjoy a similar relation to (1)? No, I do not think that Plantinga has precluded CF’s rejoinder; and consequently he has not proved that (1) fails to be self-evident to the classical foundationalist’.²³

However, even if Plantinga can show that (1) is not self-evident for classical foundationalists, he has not shown that (1) could not be deductively or inductively inferred from statements that are self-evident or incorrigible or evident to the senses. As Philip Quinn has argued, the classical foundationalist

19. ‘Religious Belief Without Evidence’, p. 499.

20. *Ibid.*

21. (1): ‘A proposition p is properly basic for a person S if and only if p is self-evident to S, or incorrigible, or evident to the senses’.

22. James E. Tomberlin, review of Plantinga and Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality*, in *Nous*, 20, 1986, p. 405.

23 *Ibid.*

can use the broadly inductive procedures suggested by Plantinga to arrive at (1). Since the community of classical foundationalists is responsible for its own set of examples of properly basic beliefs and the conditions that justify them, it would not be surprising that the hypothesis they came up with in order to account for their examples would be (1).²⁴

Furthermore, even if Plantinga has refuted classical foundationalism, this would hardly dispose of foundationalism. Contemporary foundationalism has seriously modified the classical theory,²⁵ and it is not at all clear that in the light of these modifications, Plantinga's critique could be sustained. Recall that one of his criticisms was that a statement such as 'The world existed five minutes ago' could not be justified on classical foundationalist grounds. Since contemporary foundationalists include memory statements in the class of basic statements, there would not seem to be any particular problem in justifying such a statement, for 'I remember having my breakfast ten minutes ago' can be a properly basic statement. Furthermore, if basic statements only have to be initially credible and not self-evident or incorrigible or evident to the senses, the criticism of self-referential inconsistency is much easier to meet. It is not at all implausible to suppose that a criterion of basicity in term of initial credibility is itself either initially credible or based on statements that are.

Plantinga is aware that there is more to foundationalism than the classical formulation of it. He says:

Of course the evidentialist objection *need* not presuppose classical foundationalism; someone who accepted a different version of foundationalism could no doubt urge this objection. But in order to evaluate it, we should have to see what criterion of properly basic was being invoked. In the absence of such specification the objection remains at best a promissory note. So far as the present discussion goes, then, the next move is up to the evidential objector.²⁶

Many contemporary foundationalist theories have been constructed on nonclassical lines.²⁷ Indeed, it may be safe to say that few contemporary foundationalists accept the classical view or even take it seriously. Moreover, these contemporary versions are hardly promissory notes, as Plantinga must be aware. Indeed, his refutation of classical foundationalism

24. Quinn, 'In Search of the Foundations of Theism', *Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 472-473.

25. Cf. Michael P. Levine, review of Plantinga and Wolterstorff, '*Faith and Rationality*' in *Philosophia*, 16, 1986, p. 447. See also Julie Gowan, 'Foundationalism and the Justification of Religious Belief', *Religious Studies*, 19, 1983, pp. 393-406.

26. Plantinga, 'Religious Belief without Evidence', p. 493.

27. See, for example, D. M. Armstrong, *Belief, Truth and Knowledge*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1973; Kenny, *Faith and Reason*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1983; and Anthony Quinton, *The Nature of Things*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973.

has just about as much relevance for contemporary foundationalism as a refutation of the emotive theory in ethics has for contemporary ethical noncognitivism. The next move, therefore, does not seem to be up to contemporary foundationalists. Plantinga must go on to show that his critique has relevance to the contemporary foundationalist program and that, given the best contemporary formulations of foundationalism, beliefs about God can be basic statements. This he has yet to do.

The Trouble with Reformed Foundationalism

What can one say about Plantinga's ingenious attempt to save theism from the charge of irrationality by making beliefs about God basic?

(1) Plantinga's claim that his proposal would not allow just any belief to become a basic belief is misleading. It is true that it would not allow just any belief to become a basic belief *from the point of view of Reformed epistemologists*. However it would seem to allow any belief at all to become basic from the point of view of *some* community.²⁸ Although reformed epistemologists would not have to accept voodoo beliefs as rational, voodoo followers would be able to claim that insofar as they are basic in the voodoo community they are rational and, moreover, that reformed thought was irrational in this community. Indeed, Plantinga's proposal would generate many different communities that could *legitimately* claim that their basic beliefs are rational and that these beliefs conflict with basic beliefs of other communities.²⁹ Among the communities generated might be devil worshippers, flat earthers, and believers in fairies just so long as belief in the devil, the flatness of the earth, and fairies was basic in the respective communities.

(2) On this view the rationality of any belief is absurdly easy to obtain. The cherished belief that is held without reason by *any* group could be considered properly basic by the group's members. There would be no way to make a critical evaluation of any beliefs so considered. The community's most cherished beliefs and the conditions that, according to the community, correctly trigger such beliefs would be accepted uncritically by the members of the community as just so many more examples of basic beliefs and justifying conditions. The more philosophical members of the community could go on to propose hypotheses as to the necessary and sufficient conditions for inclusion in this set. Perhaps, using this inductive procedure, a criterion could be formulated. However, what examples the hypotheses must account for would be decided by the community. As Plantinga says, each community would be responsible only to its own set of examples in formulating a criterion, and each would decide what is to

28. Cf. William J. Abraham, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1985. pp. 93-96.

29. *Ibid.*, p.95.

be included in this set.

(3) Plantinga seems to suppose that there is a consensus in the Christian community about what beliefs are basic and what conditions justify these beliefs. But this is not so. Some Christians believe in God on the basis of the traditional arguments or on the basis of religious experiences; their belief in God is not basic. There would, then, certainly be no agreement in the Christian community over whether belief in God is basic or nonbasic. More important, there would be no agreement on whether doctrinal beliefs concerning the authority of the pope, the makeup of the Trinity, the nature of Christ, the means of salvation, and so on were true, let alone basic. Some Christian sects would hold certain doctrinal beliefs to be basic and rational; others would hold the same beliefs to be irrational and, indeed, the gravest of heresies. Moreover, there would be no agreement over the conditions for basic belief. Some Christians might believe that a belief is properly basic when it is triggered by listening to the pope. Others would violently disagree. Even where there was agreement over the right conditions, these would seem to justify conflicting basic beliefs and, consequently, conflicting religious sects founded on them. For example, a woman named Jones, the founder of sect S_1 might read the Bible and be impressed that God is speaking to her and telling her that p . A man named Smith, the founder of sect S_2 might read the Bible and be impressed that God is speaking to him and telling him that $\sim p$. So Jones's belief that p and Smith's belief that $\sim p$ would both be properly basic. One might wonder how this differs from the doctrinal disputes that have gone on for centuries among Christian sects and persist to this day. The difference is that on Plantinga's proposal each sect could *justifiably* claim that its belief, for which there might be no evidence or argument, was completely rational.

(4) So long as belief that there is no God was basic for them, atheists could also justify the claim that belief in God is irrational relative to their basic beliefs and the conditions that trigger them without critically evaluating any of the usual reasons for believing in God. Just as theistic belief might be triggered by viewing the starry heavens above and reading the Bible, so atheistic beliefs might be triggered by viewing the massacre of innocent children below and reading the writings of Robert Ingersoll. Theists may disagree, but is that relevant? To paraphrase Plantinga: Must atheists' criteria conform to the Christian communities' criteria? Surely not. The atheistic community is responsible to *its* set of examples, not to theirs.

(5) There may not at present be any clear criterion for what can be a basic belief, but belief in God seems peculiarly inappropriate for inclusion in the class since there are clear disanalogies between it and the basic beliefs allowable by classical foundationalism. For example, in his critique

of classical foundationalism, Plantinga has suggested that belief in other minds and the external world should be considered basic. There are many plausible alternatives to belief in an all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing God, but there are few, if any, plausible alternatives to belief in other minds and the external world. Moreover, even if one disagrees with these arguments that seem to provide evidence against the existence of God, surely one must attempt to meet them. Although there are many skeptical arguments against belief in other minds and the external world, there are in contrast no seriously accepted arguments purporting to show that there are no other minds or no external world. In this world, atheism and agnosticism are live options for many intelligent people; solipsism is an option only for the mentally ill.

(6) As we have seen, Plantinga, following Calvin, says that some conditions that trigger belief in God or particular beliefs about God also justify these beliefs and that, although these beliefs concerning God are basic, they are not groundless. Although Plantinga gave no general account of what these justifying conditions are, he presented some examples of what he meant and likened these justifying conditions to those of properly basic perceptual and memory statements. The problem here is the weakness of the analogy. As Plantinga points out, before we take a perceptual or memory belief as properly basic we must have evidence that our perception or memory is not faulty. Part of the justification for believing that our perception or memory is not faulty is that in general it agrees with the perception or memory of our epistemological peers – that is, our equals in intelligence, perspicacity, honesty, thoroughness, and other relevant epistemic virtues, as well as with our other experiences.³⁰ For example, unless my perceptions generally agreed with other perceivers with normal eyesight in normal circumstances and with my nonvisual experience – for example, that I feel something solid when I reach out – there would be no justification for supposing that my belief that I see a rose-colored wall in front of me is properly basic. Plantinga admits that if I know my memory is unreliable, my belief that I had breakfast should not be taken as properly basic. However, one knows that one's memory is reliable by determining whether it coheres with the memory reports of other people whose memory is normal and with one's other experiences.

As we have already seen, lack of agreement is commonplace in religious contexts. Different beliefs are triggered in different people when they behold the starry heavens or when they read the Bible. Beholding the starry heavens can trigger a pantheistic belief or a purely aesthetic response without any religious component. Sometimes no

30. See Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*, p. 82; and Richard Grigg, 'Theism and Proper Basicity: A Response to Plantinga', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 14, 1983, p. 126.

particular response or belief at all is triggered. From what we know about the variations of religious belief, it is likely that people would not have theistic beliefs when they beheld the starry heavens if they had been raised in nontheistic environments. Similarly, a variety of beliefs and responses are triggered when the Bible is read. Some people are puzzled and confused by the contradictions, others become skeptical of the biblical stories, others believe that God is speaking to them and has appointed them as His spokesperson, others believe God is speaking to them but has appointed no one as His spokesperson. In short, there is no consensus in the Christian community, let alone among Bible readers generally. So unlike perception and memory, there are no grounds for claiming that a belief in God is properly basic since the conditions that trigger it yield widespread disagreement among epistemological peers.

(7) Part of the trouble with Plantinga's account of basic belief is the assumption he makes concerning what it means to say that a person accepts one proposition on the basis of accepting another. According to Michael Levine, Plantinga understands the relation in this way:

(A) For any person S, and distinct propositions p and q, S believes q on the basis of p only if S entertains p, S accepts p, S infers q from p, and S accepts q.

Contemporary foundationalists do not accept (A) as a correct account of the relation of accepting one proposition on the basis of another. The following seems more in accord with contemporary understanding:

(B) For any person S and distinct propositions p and q, if S believes q, and S would cite p if queried under optional conditions about his reasons for believing in q, then S believes q on the basis of p.

On (B) it seems unlikely that any nonepistemologically deficient person – for example, a normal adult – would be unable to cite any reason for believing in God if this person did believe in God. Consequently, Plantinga's claim that 'the mature theist does not typically accept belief in God . . . as a conclusion from other things that he believes'³¹ is irrelevant if his claim is understood in terms of (A) and probably false if understood in terms of (B).³²

(8) Finally, to consider belief in God as a basic belief seems completely out of keeping with the spirit and intention of foundationalism. Whatever else it was and whatever its problems, foundationalism was an attempt to provide critical tools for objectively appraising knowledge claims and provide a nonrelativistic basis for knowledge. Plantinga's foundationalism is radically relativistic and puts any belief beyond rational appraisal once it is declared basic.

31. 'Is Belief in God Rational?' p. 27.

32. On this point see also Gowen, 'Foundationalism and the Justification of Religious Belief', p. 404.

The Trouble with Foundationalism

So far in my critique of Plantinga's attempt to incorporate beliefs in or about God into the set of properly basic beliefs that form the foundation of knowledge, I have uncritically accepted the idea that the structure of knowledge must have a foundation in terms of basic beliefs. But, as Laurence BonJour has recently shown, there is a serious problem with any foundationalist account of knowledge.³³

According to all foundationalist accounts, basic statements are justified noninferentially. For example, contemporary foundationalists who hold a moderate position maintain that properly basic statements, although not incorrigible or self-evident, are highly justified without inductive or deductive support. But, it may be asked, where does this justification come from? As BonJour argues, a basic constraint on any standards of justification for empirical knowledge is that there is a good reason for thinking that those standards lead to truth. So if basic beliefs are to provide a foundation for knowledge for the moderate foundationalist, then whatever the criterion for being properly basic, it must provide a good reason for supposing that basic beliefs are true. Further, such a criterion must provide grounds for the person who holds a basic belief to suppose that it is true. Thus moderate foundationalism must hold that for any person P, basic belief B, and criterion of being properly basic Φ in order for P to be justified in holding properly basic belief B, P must be justified in believing the premises of the following justifying argument:

- (1) B has feature Φ .
- (2) Beliefs having feature Φ are likely to be true.

(3) Therefore, B is highly likely to be true.

Although, as BonJour argues, it might be possible that one of the two premises in the above argument could be known to be true on an *a priori* basis, it does not seem possible that both premises could be known *a priori*. Once this is granted, it follows that B is not basic after all, since B's justification would depend on some other empirical belief. But if B is properly basic, its justification cannot depend on any other empirical belief. BonJour goes on to meet objections to his argument, showing that a coherent account of the structure of empirical knowledge can be developed to overcome this problem of foundationalism and that the objections usually raised against the coherence theory can be answered. Surely any defender of foundationalism must meet BonJour's challenge.

As we have seen, when Plantinga proposes that belief about God can be considered properly basic, he admits that he did not have any criterion for being properly basic. But BonJour's argument tends to show that whatever

33. Laurence BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985, pp. 31-32.

criterion Plantinga might offer, there will be a problem for reformed foundationalism. If BonJour is correct, whatever this criterion is, it will have to provide a good reason for supposing that properly basic beliefs are true, and this will involve knowledge of further empirical beliefs. In order to defend his position, Plantinga must refute BonJour's argument.

Conclusion

In Chapter 1 it was argued that there was a strong presumption that belief in God should be based on epistemic reasons. Some theists disagree, maintaining that religious belief is basic or should be based on faith. The conclusion here is that this argument fails. Although not all theories of faith have been examined here, the ones that were are representative enough to give us confidence that all such arguments will fail.

In a way Aquinas seems to agree with our position. He maintains that belief in the existence of God should be based on epistemic reasons; and, as we shall see in Chapter 14, he believed the arguments he produced provided such reasons. However, he believed that certain Christian dogmas were not provable by means of argument and must be based on faith. But even here he thought that one could have good epistemic reason to believe that these dogmas were revealed by God. He was wrong, however, to suppose that they were. Kierkegaard's view that faith in God should be based on absurdities and improbabilities was rejected, since the arguments he used to support this view were unsound and, in any case, his view led to fanaticism. Wittgensteinian fideism was also rejected, since it led to absurdities and presupposed an indefensible view of meaning and language.

Plantinga's reformed foundationalism has some interesting similarities to the doctrine that belief in God should be based on faith, but should not be identified with it. To be sure, his view is similar to that of Aquinas, who maintains that particular Christian doctrines, although not themselves based on reason, are rational. The basic difference between the Aquinas and Plantinga positions is that Aquinas attempts to provide epistemic reasons that would persuade all rational beings to accept certain propositions as revealed truths. Plantinga provides no such reasons other than the argument that belief in God is basic and some such beliefs, including belief in God, are completely rational. Thus Plantinga's views differ markedly from those of Kierkegaard, who forsook any appeal to rationality in justifying religious belief. Plantinga's views also differ in important respects from Wittgensteinian fideism. While Wittgensteinian fideism appeals to ordinary religious practice and language to justify belief in God, Plantinga appeals to theoretical considerations from epistemology. Nevertheless, Plantinga's reformed foundationalism should be rejected since his arguments against classical foundationalism are weak, the logic of his position leads to a radical and absurd relativism, and foundationalism in general has serious problems.