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DOES BELIEF IN GOD NEED PROOF?

J. Wesley Robbins

In a number of recent and forthcoming papers William Alston and Alvin Plantinga have argued that there are certain theistic propositions (about an immaterial person who exists *a se*; is perfect in goodness, knowledge, and power; and is the creator of the world) such that there is no reasonable epistemological objection to their being accepted without proof.¹ They claim that, in Plantinga's terms, belief in God is properly basic.

The theistic propositions that Alston and Plantinga are talking about are relatively specific and concrete ones, each of which entails the more general proposition that there is a person such as God. These propositions are supposed to need no proof when they are believed in conjunction with some specified non-propositional, experiential condition. Their acceptance then is not groundless in the sense of being arbitrary or gratuitous. But it is the non-propositional condition that provides the evidential ground in this case, rather than other propositions.

Thus, to cite one of Plantinga's examples, a person beholds the starry heavens and thereupon is strongly inclined to believe that God has created all of this. Or, as in Alston's examples, someone who has certain kinds of non-doxastic religious experience thereupon forms beliefs about God, to the effect that God is speaking to one, guiding one, or just being present to one.

Alston and Plantinga contend that in such cases Christians typically accept such specific propositions about God (which, following Alston, I will refer to as theistic manifestation propositions) as ones that do not need proof. They go on to argue that, epistemologically speaking, there is no reasonable objection to this practice.

Their arguments in this regard are central to a concerted effort on the part of a number of evangelical Christian philosophers to show that Christian theism is in a stronger position intellectually due to the discrediting of a particular theory of knowledge (classical foundationalism) and of an epistemological objection to belief in God that is based on that theory (the evidentialist objection).²

Classical foundationalism is a description of what I will refer to as the rational-evidential structure of human thought. According to this description that structure, considered as a group of propositions, is differentiated into those that are evidentially deficient, and thus need the evidential support of other propositions, and those that are evidentially self-sufficient, and thus do not require such support.

(In the remainder of this paper I will refer to this as the difference between propositions that need proof and those that do not need proof.)

In addition, the classical foundationalist description of this structure is such that propositions about God (even the manifestation propositions described by Alston and Plantinga) are excluded from the class of those that do not need proof.

Given those two features of rational-evidential structure, the evidentialist objection to belief in God is simply that propositions about God have no place whatsoever in the structure because there is not enough evidence forthcoming from other propositions to compensate for their evidential deficiency.

In their responses to this objection and to its epistemological underpinnings, Alston and Plantinga focus on the exclusion of theistic manifestation propositions from the class of those that do not need proof. They contend, in somewhat different ways, that this exclusion cannot be carried out in a consistent and nonarbitrary way. This being the case, they write off the evidentialist objection itself as an unreasonable one.

The claim that they make in this connection is a rather strong one. It is that any such objection, based on the exclusion of theistic manifestation propositions from the class of those that do not need proof, is liable to be inconsistent or arbitrary and, in either case, unreasonable. This amounts to saying that the rational-evidential structure of human thought is such that belief in God can be guaranteed against any such epistemological objection.

Neither Alston nor Plantinga claim that there is any way to guarantee epistemologically that the theistic manifestation propositions are ones that do not need proof. But they do claim that once they are accepted as propositions that need no proof, there is no consistent and non-arbitrary way to show epistemologically that they are not entitled to such acceptance.

Both parties to this dispute over the epistemological status of theistic manifestation propositions agree that there are certain things that can be said in advance about the rational-evidential structure of human thought. Some of these things have to do, however minimally, with the distinction between propositions that do, and those that do not, need proof. This prior epistemological knowledge can then be used to criticize or to defend other propositions. It can, for instance, be used to defend belief in God against any epistemological objection that is based on the supposition that even theistic manifestation propositions need proof.

The question that I want to discuss in this paper is whether Alston and Plantinga have succeeded in showing that there is something unreasonable about the exclusion of these theistic manifestation propositions from the class of propositions that do not need proof. Have they succeeded in showing that the vocabulary of Christian theism in general, and these theistic propositions in particular, can be

guaranteed against any epistemological objection that is based on this exclusion?

My contention is that they have not succeeded. This is because the exclusion can be made without reference to the rational-evidential structure of human thought. Specifically, it can be made without supposing that the difference between propositions that do and those that do not need proof has anything to do with the nature of that structure. If I am correct, then the comfort that Christian theists are finding in the demise of classical foundationalist epistemology is ill-founded.

There are optional ways in which we can describe ourselves as thinkers and inquirers. Here, I want to contrast two such options. One is the epistemological essentialism that underlies both the evidentialist objection as described by Alston and Plantinga and their responses to that objection. The other is what Richard Rorty calls epistemological behaviorism (or pragmatism).

My reason for invoking this contrast is to show, at a minimum, that the description that Alston and Plantinga give of the evidentialist objection to belief in God is an optional one. In particular, the exclusion of theistic manifestation propositions from the class of propositions that do not need proof does not have to be put in essentialist terms. When it is not, but is put in pragmatic terms, then it is neither inconsistent nor arbitrary in the ways described by Plantinga and Alston. Consequently, the objection is not necessarily an epistemologically unreasonable one.

Pragmatism, as Rorty describes it, is "...the doctrine that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones—no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of the mind, or language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow-inquirers."³ Since these remarks cannot be anticipated and disposed of in advance, "There is no method for knowing *when* one has reached the truth, or when one is closer to it than before."⁴

In other words, pragmatism is simply anti-essentialism so far as truth, knowledge, rationality, evidence, and the like are concerned. It is the denial that there is anything worth saying in advance, in the name of the nature of these things, about which propositions should, and which should not, be believed. In the absence of any such prior knowledge about the rational-evidential structure of human thought, "There is no wholesale epistemological way to direct, or criticize, or underwrite, the course of inquiry."⁵

When the dispute over the epistemological status of theistic manifestation propositions is put in these, pragmatic, terms it boils down to a question about epistemological behavior. The difference, between needing and not needing proof, amounts to the difference between accepting propositions without question, or objection, or demand for proof and not doing that—but questioning, objecting,

demanding proof.

But then the determination as to which propositions do not need proof, that is, which are to serve as starting points for rational thought, is contingent upon just this sort of epistemological behavior. There simply will be no way to determine in advance, independently of what people do in this regard, which propositions do, and which do not need proof.

There will, of course, then be no way to determine in advance that the theistic manifestation propositions are ones that need proof as a matter of epistemological principle. But, by the same token, there will be no way to determine in advance that their exclusion from the class of propositions that do not need proof is unreasonable. It is this feature of epistemological pragmatism that leads me to claim, as a minimum, that Alston and Plantinga have not succeeded in showing that the evidentialist objection to belief in God is epistemologically unreasonable.

There is some disagreement between Alston and Plantinga as to just what it is that is unreasonable about the evidentialist objection. According to Plantinga, it is based on a description of rational-evidential structure that is self-referentially incoherent. According to Alston, it is based on a description of that structure which gives arbitrarily different treatment to two sets of propositions that have the same rational-evidential value.

Both men agree with their opponents that this structure must be differentiated into those propositions that do and those that do not need proof. It is this feature of the structure, coupled with the alleged impossibility of identifying its propositional starting points in a way that both excludes theistic manifestation propositions and is consistent and non-arbitrary that, according to both Alston and Plantinga, makes the evidentialist objection an unreasonable one.

According to Plantinga, the rational-evidential structure of human thought will inevitably have propositions in it that do not need proof because the alternative (of a structure in which every proposition is evidentially supported by other propositions) would have a person believing infinitely many propositions. And, in his pithy phrase, "...no one has time, these busy days, for that."⁶

As he sees it, the evidentialist objection has typically been made in conjunction with a specific description of the propositional starting points for rational human thought. According to that description, only propositions that are either self-evident or incorrigible are such as to need no proof.

It is this description that, according to Plantinga, makes classical foundationalism self-referentially incoherent as a description of the rational-evidential structure of human thought. In particular, this epistemological principle that supposedly identifies the propositions that do not need proof has no place in the structure described. It is neither self-evident nor incorrigible. Nor is it provable

from propositions that are. Consequently, by its own description of rational-evidential structure, classical foundationalism does not have that structure. Thus, an epistemological objection to belief in God posed in its terms is bound to be an unreasonable one.

More generally, Plantinga suggests that the same kind of situation is likely to occur even if some other principle of starting points for rational thought is substituted for the classical foundationalist one. He expresses doubt that "...any revealing necessary and sufficient condition for proper basicity follow from clearly self-evident premises by clearly acceptable arguments."⁷ But if it is not possible to distinguish those propositions that do not need proof with reference to the nature of rational-evidential structure itself, then any prior epistemological principle which purports to do just that will be in the same predicament as the classical foundationalist one. It will be part of a system of propositions that lacks what it describes as being the rational-evidential structure of human thought.

There is another way in which classical foundationalism might be said to be unreasonable in this connection. If an exception were to be made in the case of its principle of starting points and this were to be accepted as a proposition that needs no proof, even though it is neither self-evident or incorrigible, then that proposition would be no different in that respect than the theistic manifestation propositions which Christians typically accept as ones that need no proof. It would then be quite arbitrary to exclude these theistic propositions from the class of propositions that need no proof while including this epistemological principle.

Given this skepticism as to the prospects of any such prior principle of rational starting points for thought, Plantinga suggests that a principle of starting points will have to be arrived at by an inductive procedure. It will need to be formulated and tested as an hypothesis that is acceptable (unacceptable) as it conforms (fails to conform) to particular examples of propositions that do not need proof. For Christians, such a set of examples will typically include theistic manifestation propositions. So any general principle of starting points that is acceptable to these Christians is going to have to conform to these theistic examples, among others.

Plantinga knows of course that there are people who are not going to be willing to admit that theistic manifestation propositions are examples of propositions that need no proof. Consequently, they will disagree with Christians, to this extent at least, in principle as to which propositions do, and which do not, need proof. What, if anything, is to be done in this case in order to arrive at a generally acceptable description of the propositional starting points of rational thought?

Plantinga's answer is that "The Christian or Jew will of course suppose that belief in God is entirely proper and rational; if he doesn't accept this belief on the basis of other propositions, he will conclude that it is basic for him and quite properly so. Followers of Bertrand Russell and Madelyn Murray O'Hare may

disagree, but how is that relevant? Must my criteria [for propositions that need no proof], or those of the believing community, conform to their examples? Surely not. The theistic community is responsible to its set of examples, not to theirs."⁸

Alston is not content to let the matter rest there. He finds Plantinga's dismissal of examples of propositions that do not need proof that conflict with those of the theistic community to be "...a bit hard-nosed." He surmises that Plantinga's complacency in this regard stems from his not having "...probed deeply enough into the concepts of proper basicity, rationality, and justification to provide the basis for further discussion."⁹

Alston goes on to say that "If we want to critically evaluate a claim to proper basicity, and if, as Plantinga correctly observes, it is not antecedently obvious what the propriety-making characteristics are, we will have to get clear about the kind of propriety involved."¹⁰

Clearly, these are the remarks of an epistemological essentialist. Alston believes that prior consideration of the rational-evidential structure of human thought will yield more in the way of a principle of starting points than Plantinga has allowed. Such a principle could then, of course, be used to adjudicate exactly the kind of stand-off disagreement over which propositions do not need proof that Plantinga has described.

Alston's account of the rational-evidential structure of human thought is put in terms of epistemic practices. These are specific ways of forming propositional beliefs, where the point of the practices is the attainment of a preponderance of true beliefs over false ones. Such practices are then either generally reliable or unreliable ways of attaining this epistemic goal.

When it comes to determining which is the case (whether particular practices are reliable or unreliable) we have to operate under some rather severe limitations. Any such determination that is carried out on our part is going to involve the use of one or more such practice, whose reliability is taken for granted in the process.

Furthermore, there are some epistemic practices that are especially deeply entrenched for human beings. These are ones in which propositional beliefs are formed directly upon non-doxastic materials and which, in addition, provide unique informational access to some subject-matter. This latter means that the reliability of all other epistemic practices that deal with this subject-matter are dependent upon the reliability of this particular practice and not *vice-versa*. Alston suggests sense perception as one example of such a deeply entrenched epistemic practice, that is, the practice of objectifying sense experience in terms of independently existing physical objects.

Within these limitations, there are two epistemic values that may be assigned to epistemic practices that are to have a place in the rational-evidential structure: strong reasonability (proven reliable) and weak reasonability (not proven unreliable).¹¹

Alston suggests that if any of the deeply entrenched (basic) epistemic practices are to have a place in the rational-evidential structure, there is little choice but to admit them as being weakly reasonable. In their case, this is the only one of the two epistemic values that we are likely to be able to apply just because we will not have an independently reliable practice at our disposal in terms of which to prove the reliability of the basic ones.

And thus we have something in the way of a principle of propositional starting points for rational thought that is derived from considerations having to do with the rational-evidential structure of human thought. In general, any epistemic practice (basic or not) that is not proven unreliable is one that is weakly reasonable. And there are certain epistemic practices (basic ones) to which weak reasonability is the only epistemic value that we are likely to be able to apply. The propositional outputs of such basic epistemic practices would then be prime examples of propositions that do not need proof, epistemologically speaking. If the epistemic value of weak reasonability is granted to one basic practice then, by parity of reasoning, that same value should be granted to any similar epistemic practice. It would be arbitrary, and thus unreasonable, to grant this epistemic status in one instance and to with-hold it in other instances like it.¹²

Now Christianity itself can be construed as involving epistemic practice(s). It is the practice of objectifying certain ranges of experience in terms of Christian theism. According to both Alston and Plantinga this typically involves the formation of propositional beliefs about God directly upon non-propositional, experiential materials. In other words, Christianity is an epistemic practice at least some of the propositional outputs of which, theistic manifestation propositions, are commonly accepted by its participants as not needing proof.

Alston argues at length that this Christian epistemic practice is a reasonable one in the weak sense of the term. There is, he claims, insufficient reason to conclude that it is unreliable. It thus has exactly the same rational-evidential value as do the epistemic practices that are at the base of the rational-evidential structure of human thought. Consequently, it is as reasonable to accept its basic propositions about God as ones that do not need proof (as a matter of epistemological principle) as it is to accept that propositional outputs of those basic epistemic practices as ones that do not need proof. In other words, it is as reasonable for Christians to accept the manifestation propositions about God (based directly on their religious experience) as ones that do not need proof as it is for anyone to accept perceptual propositions about physical objects (based directly on their sense experience) as ones that do not need proof.¹³

And now there is something more to be said to the Bertrand Russells of the world than Plantinga had allowed. Instead of being left with a stand-off of conflicting examples of propositions that do not need proof, the theistic community has epistemological principle on its side in the first place. Anyone who claims, contrary to the epistemic practice of this community, that even theistic manifestation propositions need proof can quickly be convicted of being unreasonable. They are guilty of treating two sets of propositions (both of which have the same rational-evidential value) in an arbitrarily different manner: claiming that the theistic set needs proof while the other set of propositions, perceptual ones for example, does not need proof.

The evidentialist objection to belief in God is based, as we have seen, on the general exclusion of propositions about God from the class of propositions that do not need proof. In its essentialist versions this exclusion is said to have to do with the character of the rational-evidential structure of human thought. For instance, the classical foundationalist exclusion is based on the notion that only self-evident or incorrigible propositions are suited to be the starting points for rational thought, because they are the only ones for which there is no mistaking the false ones for the true or *vice versa*.

In its pragmatic version, this exclusion would be made for context specific reasons that involve no reference to the rational-evidential structure of human thought. There is no claim to have a general description, related to that structure, of the sorts of propositions that, essentially, need no proof. Consequently, if and when even theistic manifestation propositions are excluded, on pragmatic grounds, as starting points for rational thought, this exclusion does not involve either the self-referential incoherence or the arbitrariness that Plantinga and Alston, respectively, connect with the evidentialist objection.

An epistemological pragmatist sees human thought and inquiry as operating only with what Rorty calls retail constraints. What is explicitly denied is the availability of any further, deeper constraints provided by the nature of thought or language, for example. To use Rorty's metaphor, human thought and inquiry is a conversation in which the participants say what they have to say to one another without the benefit of translation into, or adjudication by, any neutral vocabulary provided by the over-all rational-evidential structure of their dialogue.

Put in these terms, even the starting points of human thought will be subject only to retail constraints. And people will say what they have to say to one another about those starting points without the benefit of translation into, or adjudication by, any neutral vocabulary provided by the over-all rational-evidential structure of their dialogue.

A conversational objection to one's own starting points for thought takes the

form of alternative epistemological behavior concerning which propositions need proof and which do not—questioning those that one typically accepts without question and taking for granted those that one typically puts in question. Such an objection is a retail constraint in the sense of posing a living option to one's own standard ways of starting to think about this, that, or the other subject.

Consider, for example, a theistic community in which, as described by Plantinga, one sort of manifestation proposition consists of propositions to the effect that God approves of this or disapproves of that. These are this community's starting points for thought about moral life. A retail constraint on that practice is posed by the epistemological behavior of other people who unquestioningly accept different non-theistic propositions as starting points for their thinking about moral life (ones, for example, about human approvals and disapprovals). The objection and the constraint need be no more than the contrast, and appeal, of the alternative way of moral life in which the non-theistic vocabulary is embedded.

This contrast and appeal might be put into words addressed to members of the theistic community as follows. "In thinking about and coping with the problems of moral life, you start with a theistic vocabulary and propositions. We don't. We start with a humanistic vocabulary and propositions. Doing it our way has these advantages, and these disadvantages, compared to your way of doing it. So far as we are concerned, your theistic starting point needs proof. It doesn't work as well in this, moral, context, as our humanistic starting point." In this case, a particular sort of theistic manifestation proposition has been put in question as needing proof, in the context of moral life.

A pragmatic version of the general exclusion of theistic propositions from the class of propositions that do not need proof is simply an accumulation of objections, like the one just described, to theistic starting points in a number of different, specific contexts. The claim in each case is that some non-theistic propositions better serve some human purpose, as starting points for thought in this context, than do the theistic propositions that are alleged to need proof. When enough of these context-specific objections are accumulated, then the theistic community is being presented with the claim that in general the theistic manifestation propositions that it currently accepts as not needing proof are in need of proof when they are compared with a variety of non-theistic alternatives in each context.

In this eventuality, these theistic propositions have been placed in exactly the position that is described by Plantinga as underlying the evidentialist objection. They have been put in question by being excluded from the class of propositions that do not need proof. The crucial difference in this case is that this exclusion has been made without reference to any allegedly prior epistemological principle of starting points for rational thought. It has been made solely in terms of

alternative, substantive propositions whose status as starting points for thought is a function of epistemological behavior.

I am not suggesting that, in the case of this example, the members of the theistic community have to agree with this pragmatic exclusion of their theistic manifestation propositions from the class of propositions that do not need proof. Neither am I suggesting that in the face of the objection there is any special burden of proof that is placed on them to defend their acceptance of these propositions as ones that do not need proof. I am saying that the constraint is there and that it is an objection to their way of thinking and talking at the level of starting-points. It is an objection to their treating any theistic manifestation propositions as ones that do not need proof. But since it does not even claim that its own starting points for thought need no proof as a matter of epistemological principle (given the character of the rational-evidential structure of human thought), its exclusion of these theistic propositions as starting points for rational thought is neither self-referentially incoherent nor arbitrary in the ways said by Plantinga and Alston to be the case with any evidentialist objection to belief in God.

If members of the theistic community are persuaded in the course of conversation to alter their own epistemological behavior in this regard, they have done nothing that Plantinga or Alston could claim to be unreasonable. In particular, they would not have yielded to an objection to their own belief in God that was unreasonable in the first place.

This pragmatic exclusion of theistic manifestation propositions from the class of propositions that do not need proof clearly is not liable to the sort of self-referential incoherence that Plantinga claims infects any such epistemological exclusion. It is made with the explicit disclaimer of any intention to describe the rational-evidential structure of human thought. Consequently, in no way is it involved in the confusion of providing a description of a structure that it is supposed to exemplify but from which it is excluded by its own description.¹⁴

On this matter of starting-points for thought, it seems to me that Plantinga is a fellow pragmatist. His disavowal of deductive epistemology in this regard says that the determination as to which propositions do not need proof is going to have to be made without reference to the nature of rational-evidential structure as such. But his proposed inductive epistemology of starting-points is nothing more or less than the canonization of the epistemological behavior of some group of people. That just is epistemological behaviorism. In this case, his claim that it is perfectly reasonable for Christians to accept theistic manifestation propositions as ones that do not need proof amounts to nothing more nor less than the remark that this is exactly what certain Christian people typically do.

In this connection, Plantinga's dictum that members of the theistic community have some kind of overriding commitment to theistic manifestation propositions as examples of propositions that do not need proof is puzzling. Why are Christians responsible to these theistic propositions rather than to, say, some non-theistic religious alternative ones? Unless there is some kind of epistemological magic that attaches to these propositions in particular, it is not at all clear what rationale Plantinga could have for contending that they are to be examples of starting points for Christian thought, come what may in the course of religious inquiry. This is especially so given his own insistence that there is no prior knowledge to be had to the effect that these propositions are such as to need no proof.

Neither is this pragmatically based exclusion of theistic manifestation propositions as starting points for thought liable to Alston's charge of arbitrariness, although the matter is a bit more complicated in this case. Alston's description of the arbitrariness to which such an exclusion is supposed to be liable can be summarized again as follows. The rational-evidential structure of human thought is such that there is an epistemological value (weak reasonability) that is shared by both an epistemic practice that is located at the basis of this structure (sense perception) and Christian epistemic practice, with its theistic manifestation beliefs. It is thus arbitrary, given this epistemological situation, to exclude the theistic manifestation propositions from the class of propositions that need no proof while including propositions about physical objects, when the same epistemic value applies to both.

This charge of arbitrariness is very weak, in the first place, because it is based exclusively on an alleged sameness of epistemic value—both epistemic practices are weakly reasonable. Alston is noncommittal on whether the Christian epistemic practice is also like the perceptual practice in being a basic one. But this in turn means that he must be noncommittal on whether weak reasonability is the only one of the two epistemic values that is likely to be applicable to the Christian practice.

As a result, the question of whether we should settle for weak reasonability in the case of the Christian practice is left open. It all depends on the location of the practice in the structure of human thought. If the practice in question is a basic one—constituting our sole access to the subject matter—then there is little choice but to settle for weak reasonability. If the practice is not a basic one, then the alternative of strong reasonability is available. It is possible for the practice in question to be tested for reliability in terms of another, independent, practice so that the former practice is proven reliable or unreliable.

But then the differential treatment of the theistic manifestation propositions need not be arbitrary. It need only be based on the supposition that there is

another independent epistemic practice (in this case, one in which no theistic propositions are accepted without proof) in terms of which the entire Christian epistemic practice (including the acceptance of theistic manifestation propositions without proof) is subject to reliability tests. Unless the Christian practice is, like the perceptual one, a basic epistemic practice, then on Alston's own terms it is fair game for this sort of differential treatment. The moral of this story is that if this arbitrariness charge is going to stick, Alston cannot remain noncommittal on whether the Christian epistemic practice is a basic one.

More importantly, the arbitrariness charge is weak because the idea of an epistemic practice is applied ambiguously to the two cases in question. Alston describes the perceptual practice as involving the formation of beliefs about the immediate physical environment directly upon sensory experience. It provides unique informational access in that "Any other way of finding out about the physical world presupposes the reliability of this [perceptual practice]."¹⁵ But, according to Alston, this practice considered historically has had a variable conceptual-propositional content that allows for change and development. It consists of the objectification of sense experience in terms of some unspecified vocabulary.

The Christian epistemic practice, on the other hand, is described as involving the objectification of religious experience in terms of a specifically Christian theistic vocabulary. This practice is described as having a fixed conceptual-propositional content that does not allow for change and development.

In the perceptual case, Alston says that he favors a developmental view, even at the structural level of basic epistemic practices. He speaks of human cognitive activity as having a history. And he says that he believes that "...a careful survey of the whole range of human culture over space and time would reveal that the presently dominant mode of objectifying sense experience is the outcome of a long development in the course of which it had many rivals."¹⁶

Perceptual epistemic practice is thus a collection of several different ways of thinking about the physical world even at the level of starting points for thought. The presently dominant mode (the common sense physical object vocabulary) involves thinking in terms of macroscopic physical objects and their perceptible properties. But this is one among several, alternative, vocabularies in terms of which to objectify sense experience.

In the religious case, Alston comments that perhaps "...the attempt to discern God's presence and activity from religious experience is in the state that the attempt to discern the basic nature of the physical world, by reasoning from what we learn from perception, was in the first 1600 years of our era."¹⁷ But if we think of the religious case in this way as also having a history and as being subject to development, then the most that can be said for the presently dominant mode of objectifying religious experience in our culture (by means of the vocab-

ulary of Christian theism) is that it is "...the outcome of a long development in the course of which it had [and continues to have] many rivals."

The Christian epistemic practice thus is strictly comparable to one of the several alternative vocabularies that collectively make up perceptual epistemic practice, understood historically.

What is it, then, that has the epistemological value of weak reasonability in the two cases? Is it some objectifying vocabulary or another, or is it a specific objectifying vocabulary? Alston as much as admits that it is the former in the case of sense perception. But then, even if it is admitted that there are two epistemic practices both of which have the same epistemic value, there is nothing arbitrary about treating the two cases differently so far as their respective specific objectifying vocabularies are concerned. Thus, for example, theistic manifestation propositions can be put in question by excluding them from the class of propositions that do not need proof in favor of some alternative, non-theistic, vocabulary for specifically religious reasons while no such exclusionary claim is made about common sense physical object propositions in the perceptual case, or *vice versa*. Such differential treatment would seem to be entirely within the bounds of reason in the epistemological setting that Alston has described. And it is exactly this sort of context-specific objection made in terms of alternative vocabularies that is characteristic of the pragmatic version of the evidentialist objection to belief in God.

My main objective in this paper has been to show that the evidentialist objection to belief in God is not necessarily based on an unreasonable exclusion of theistic propositions from the class of propositions that do not need proof. I have sought to accomplish that objective by describing a pragmatically based version of that objection, one that is neither self-referentially incoherent nor arbitrary in the ways described by Plantinga and Alston.

I have two concluding remarks about epistemological pragmatism that go beyond the narrow bounds of the topic of this paper. The first has to do with the intellectual difficulties of Christian theism in our culture. It seems to me that pragmatism provides for a better understanding of these difficulties than does epistemological essentialism. If I am right, belief in God is in question in our culture not because of a once and for all objection put in terms of prior philosophical knowledge about knowledge, rationality, and evidence. It is in question because of a piecemeal, gradual accumulation of substantive objections and alternatives that together have shaped our epistemological behavior to the point that propositions about God no longer serve as unquestioned starting points for thought outside of the narrow, privatized boundaries of religious devotional life, if there. The damage, seen in this way, is at once less inevitable and more

difficult to repair. It is less inevitable because, contrary to essentialism, there is nothing in the nature of the case that requires or necessitates this exclusion. It is more difficult to repair just because of the piecemeal character of the exclusion. We are looking at a number of different contexts in which, for different reasons, belief in God just is not an unquestioned starting point for thought. If this is a correct assessment, then the demolition of classical foundationalism doesn't even begin to recoup the intellectual strength and position of Christian theism in our culture.

The second comment has to do with the project of Christian revisionism and its intellectual plausibility and integrity. By Christian revisionism I mean the proposed replacement of the theistic vocabulary with a religious alternative, in connection with the Christian life. If Alston and Plantinga are right, then this project is an intellectually needless and pointless exercise, epistemologically speaking, because it is based on an epistemic assessment of theistic propositions that they have shown to be an unreasonable one.

Thus, it is not surprising in this connection to find Plantinga describing Christian thinkers like Tillich and Bultmann as being "...professedly Christian theologians, supersophisticates who proclaim the liberation of Christianity from belief in God, seeking to replace it by trust in 'Being itself' or the 'Ground of Being' or some such thing. It remains true, however, that belief in God is the foundation of Christianity."¹⁸

There is no doubt but that many such Christian revisionist proposals have been couched in epistemologically essentialist terms, including those of classical foundationalism. But the intellectual need for, and plausibility of, these projects does not stand or fall with their essentialist setting. If my pragmatic account of evidentialist objections to belief in God has any merit to it at all, then projects such as those of Tillich and Braithwaite, to name only two, cannot and should not be written off in advance as being epistemologically needless and thus intellectually implausible.¹⁹ Nor should their intellectual, not to mention religious, motivation be attributed to something so unworthy as a desire to be acceptable to the currently fashionable intellectual jet-set.

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NOTES

1. William Alston, "Religious Experience and Religious Belief" (RERB), expanded version of paper published in *Nous*, vol. XVI, no. 1 (March 1982); "Plantinga's Epistemology of Religious Belief" (PERB), forthcoming in a D. Reidel volume on Plantinga's philosophy edited by James E.

Tomberlin and Peter van Inwagen; "Christian Experience and Christian Belief" (CECB), in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983.

Alvin Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Rational?" in *Rationality and Religious Belief*, ed. C. Delaney. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979; "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" *Nous*, vol. XV, no. 1 (March 1981); "Rationality and Religious Belief" (RRB), in *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Steven Cahn and David Shatz. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982; "Reason and Belief in God" (RBG), in *Faith and Rationality*.

2. The volume cited above, *Faith and Rationality*, is a collection of papers centered around this theme.

3. Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism" in *Consequences of Pragmatism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982, p. 165.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 165f.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 162.

6. Plantinga, RBG, p. 39.

7. Plantinga, RRB, p. 275f.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 276.

9. Alston, PERB, p. 24.

10. *Ibid.*

11. I have deliberately collapsed some of Alston's epistemic value distinctions for the sake of brevity.

12. Alston, CECB, p. 119.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

14. Terence Penelhum discusses Plantinga's position in connection with what he calls the parity argument in *God and Skepticism*, chapter 7. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1983.

15. Alston, RERB, p. 13.

16. Alston, CECB, p. 128.

17. Alston, PERB, p. 36.

18. Plantinga, RBG, p. 16.

19. One of the most straightforward and in-depth Christian revisionist proposals to have come to my attention in recent times, and one which does not depend on epistemologically essentialist doctrines, is that of Don Cupitt in *Taking Leave of God*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1981.