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# PLANTINGA'S BOX

William Lad Sessions

Plantinga's Box is an (imaginary) epistemic engine that can alter a person's cognitive condition in various ways. Its present use is to conduct a thought-experiment exploring some questions of religious pluralism as they arise for someone who believes that his or her Christian beliefs are properly basic. The central questions are these: Would it be wrong for a 'properly basic Christian' to use the Box to acquire some properly basic *non*-Christian religious beliefs? Are there good reasons for such a person to use the Box for this purpose? Various considerations pro and con are sifted; the result points toward interreligious dialogue and inquiry.

Notoriously, there are in this world Christians and non-Christians, and some of the latter are Buddhists or Muslims or Jews. In this paper I wish to explore a few of the difficulties this notoriety raises for Christians who hold, like Alvin Plantinga,<sup>1</sup> that some of their Christian beliefs are properly basic. My contentions—formulated by way of a bizarre thought-experiment—are that there are no real obstacles, and there may be real incentives, for many properly basic Christians to engage in serious interreligious inquiry.

I confine my discussion throughout to *properly basic religious beliefs*,<sup>2</sup> even though many of my considerations might be applied more widely, for three reasons: (1) Such beliefs—some of them at any rate—seem to be quite important for many people. Beliefs such as belief in God (which Plantinga argues can be properly basic for some persons) reverberate throughout many persons' noetic structures, are typically held with deeply passionate and enduring conviction, and are valued far beyond many other beliefs. (2) Their possession seems to create uniquely strong obstacles to interreligious dialogue. If someone has properly basic religious beliefs, then there seems to be no need, desire, positive reason, nor even legitimate opportunity to inquire into the apparently incompatible religious beliefs of others, even when those other beliefs are properly basic for them. (3) The problems of interreligious dialogue are complicated enough when only properly basic beliefs are considered; the introduction of other kinds of epistemic states and conditions is beyond the scope of this paper.

## I.

Imagine, if you will, an epistemic engine I will call 'Plantinga's Box.'<sup>3</sup>



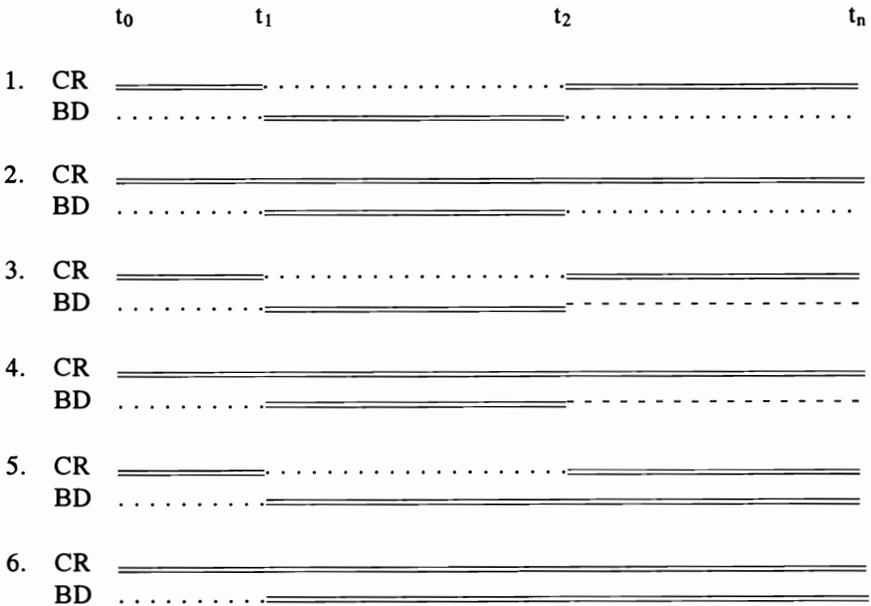
This machine is a device which can alter a cognitive system—such as yours or mine—in a number of ways I shall shortly describe. Since a cognitive system can be represented, to a first level of approximation, as a set of beliefs, we may think of Plantinga's Box as a Doxastic Deviation Device, a belief-altering machine.

Output electrodes from Plantinga's Box connect comfortably to your temples; input is from another person's similarly-wired skull. The Box's inner hardware and software are trade secrets, but that matters little; all we need to know is what sort of work it does. The Box has a distressingly high-tech keyboard replete with dials, knobs, toggles, keys, levers and buttons, only some of which can be mentioned here: The **ADD** button, of course, adds a new belief, while **DELETE** does just that. **REPLACE** deletes one belief and adds another, thereby conveniently replacing the former with the latter. **SUSPEND** retains (or produces) awareness of a proposition *p* but blocks belief that *p*. **COPY** adds one person's beliefs to the belief-set of another person with or without deleting the first person's beliefs; it can be adjusted to "piecemeal," "wholesale" or "generic" copying—the last is where it copies one person's beliefs *of a certain kind* into another person. **META** is an interesting knob; in connection with other functions it enables the beliefs altered to be *about* other beliefs, so that certain kinds of cognitive structure can appear (or disappear). Then there is the important **MEMORY** dial: when a belief is deleted it allows one to remember (more or less clearly and distinctly) that one once had that belief; when a belief is added, it lets one remember (more or less) that one once lacked that belief; and similarly with suspension and other operations. There are also calibration for remembering not only which beliefs one once had or lacked, but that one had acquired or lost them in such-and-such a manner (e.g., via Plantinga's Box), at such-and-such a time, and had held them with such-and-such a degree of confidence, and believed them to imply and be implied by various other beliefs, etc. —But I really must stop describing this marvelous machine, or we will never get around to using it.<sup>4</sup>

I want to use Plantinga's Box in the following thought-experiment. Imagine two people, Al and Go. Al (short for "Alvin") is a Christian of a Plantingan cast—i.e., he not only has some set of beliefs which are Christian<sup>5</sup>, but he also thinks that some of these Christian beliefs are properly basic—*basic*, because not believed on the basis of any other beliefs, and *properly basic*, because "it is entirely right, rational, reasonable and proper" so to believe in the basic way.<sup>6</sup> Further, Al is not a narrow sectarian who thinks that only *his* sort of Christian beliefs can be properly basic for someone. This is because he holds both that religious beliefs are not the only kind of beliefs that can be properly basic, and that within the class of religious beliefs there may well be some non-Christian beliefs which are properly basic for someone else, even though they are not properly basic, or basic, or even *beliefs*, for Al.

Go (short for "Gotama"), on the other hand, is a Buddhist, i.e. he has a set of Buddhist beliefs, some of which, we may imagine, are properly basic for him. It is not necessary that Go be a Plantingan about these property basic beliefs—i.e., one who *believes* that these beliefs are properly basic for him. It suffices for our purposes that these beliefs *are* properly basic for Go.<sup>7</sup>

Our experimental setup is as follows: We are going to arrange for the manipulation and exchange of *properly basic beliefs only*.<sup>8</sup> Since Go is to be the source and Al the recipient of the properly basic beliefs in question, input electrodes are attached to Go and output ones to Al. Go will not be affected in any way by the experiment—save for a minor headache the morning after—so let us assume that he consents to the experiment as soon as he learns that Al's current properly basic beliefs will not be altered without Al's consent and that, by the way, he (Go) will receive \$200 even if Al passes. But Al's situation is more interesting, for there are at least six options for him to consider, as illustrated by the following diagrams. Each line represents a subset of Al's properly basic religious beliefs, with 'CR' labelling his Christian ones and 'BD' his Buddhist ones; double lines indicate Al's *actual* belief at a time, single lines represent his *memory* at one time of actual belief at an earlier time (*which* earlier time will be evident), and dotted lines represent *no* belief at that time:



To explicate these alternatives:

(1) At  $t_1$ —when Plantinga's Box begins to work—Al loses all his (properly basic) Christian beliefs and gains Go's set of Buddhist ones; at  $t_2$  (following an appropriate duration, which can be varied) Al loses any Buddhist beliefs he retains at that moment and regains all of his previous Christian beliefs; and thereafter he has no memory of the amazing exchange between  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ .

(2) At  $t_1$  Al gains Go's set of Buddhist beliefs but does *not* lose his Christian ones; at  $t_2$  Al loses all his acquired Buddhist beliefs while still preserving his Christian ones; and again thereafter he has no memory of the strange interlude.

(3) At  $t_1$ , as in (1), Al loses his Christian, and gains Go's Buddhist, beliefs; at  $t_2$ , again as in (1), Al regains his Christian, and loses his (i.e., Go's) Buddhist, beliefs; but thereafter, unlike (1), he retains the memories of *having had* Go's Buddhist beliefs and of *having lacked* his own Christian ones between  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ .

(4) At  $t_1$ , as in (2), Al gains Go's Buddhist beliefs without losing his own Christian ones; at  $t_2$  Al loses the former while retaining the latter; but this time he thereafter remembers having had both Christian and Buddhist beliefs during that (wonderful? awful? bizarre?) time between  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ .

(5) At  $t_1$ , as in (1), Al loses his Christian and gains Go's Buddhist beliefs; but at  $t_2$  he retains the Buddhist beliefs while regaining his former Christian beliefs; and thereafter he continues to hold both Buddhist and Christian beliefs—at least to the extent that he *can* continue to hold them both (and this is a psychological and not an epistemic 'can').

(6) At  $t_1$ , as in (2), Al gains Go's Buddhist beliefs without losing his own Christian ones; but at  $t_2$  he retains both sets, and similarly thereafter—once again subject to whatever constraints internal to Al there are for keeping both sets.

Now of course, as you will have noticed, there is obviously a seventh option beyond these six<sup>9</sup>:

(7) Al may simply strip off the electrodes at the very outset and refuse to participate in our crazy experiment, preferring to retain intact his present cognitive system.

This seventh option is just the one I would like to compare with the previous six, asking in every case two questions: First, would it be wrong for Al to pick any option but number seven—i.e., would it be wrong for Al to use the Box to add (and maybe retain) some properly basic Buddhist beliefs? Second, would it be wrong for Al *not* to choose one of the six options over his present belief-condition—i.e. are there good reasons for Al to use the Box?<sup>10</sup>

## II.

Immediately, some preliminary problems arise. First, an ambiguity: What does 'wrong' mean here—wrong in what sense? In sections III-V below I

consider a raft of putative “wrongs” under three headings—epistemic, moral and religious ones—but doubtless there are other ways to parse the term, and difficult borderline cases in any parsing.

Second, some technical difficulties: Do we have any right to assume that Plantinga's Box will work as advertised? What if, e.g., beliefs cannot be simply acquired or lost without also acquiring or losing the associated language, concepts, emotions, attitudes, experiences, etc.? In particular, since S's belief that *p* is properly basic only if *p* is *grounded* for S,<sup>11</sup> the transfer or infusion of beliefs *as properly basic* requires concurrent transfer or infusion of the associated grounds.<sup>12</sup> Very well then, we will just have to purchase, or invent, an additional fancy machine or two—certainly an experience-inducing one, and perhaps also a language-altering machine, a concept-changing one, and so on. This will be expensive (in time and inventiveness, if not in money), and it will enormously clutter the basically trim lines of our initial doxastic engine, so I hope we don't have to worry about such additional machines here. Fortunately, so far as I can see, nothing essential about our experiment seems to depend upon such complications.

Worse, however: What if there is something (obscurely) logically *impossible* in the very idea of such a Doxastic Deviation Device? Well, certainly such a machine is technically beyond our reach (though not perhaps beyond our wildest dreams, like this one), but why should it be *logically* impossible? After all, we do seem to *learn* and *forget*—and what's that but acquiring and losing beliefs? Moreover, something very much like exchange of religious properly basic beliefs seems to occur in episodes of conversion. And surely we remember or forget our doxastic gains and losses; that's life. Therefore, since something like what Plantinga's Box is supposed to engineer does occur, let the Box do the same, only much more quickly and cheaply.

Finally, and perhaps most seriously, isn't the Box simply otiose? Isn't the central concern in a context of religious pluralism simply to *understand* the beliefs of others,<sup>13</sup> not to come to *have* or *hold* them? Isn't *understanding* a belief independent of *believing* it?<sup>14</sup> My response, in brief, is that while a certain kind or level of understanding of a belief *can* be had without having the belief, still there is a kind, degree or depth of understanding that can only be obtained through *believing* it, and this latter kind of understanding is important in the context of religious pluralism.

What, after all, is it to understand a belief?<sup>15</sup> In addition to comprehending the syntax of the sentence expressing the belief, understanding a belief also involves knowing the meaning of its constituent concepts, knowing at least most of its major implications, and perhaps knowing what grounds would justify someone in holding the belief in a properly basic way. But apparently all this knowledge can be obtained without actually *holding* the belief in question, though arguably no one could hold a belief without knowing at least

most of these things. Now, even were this all that understanding a belief involves, Plantinga's Box would still be useful. Given Go's properly basic belief that *p*, the Box could at least supply Al with true properly basic beliefs *about p's* syntax, meaning, implications and grounds—all without necessarily giving Al the belief that *p*. And perhaps this is all the understanding Al needs or wants.

But there would be something lacking—something vital, a certain depth—in all this “understanding.” One could imagine Go saying to a suitably-informed Al: “You certainly do understand a lot *about* my beliefs—perhaps even *more* about them in certain respects than I do—but you still don't really *understand my beliefs*, because you don't realize or appreciate what it is like to see the world in terms of those beliefs.<sup>16</sup> You are looking through your beliefs at my beliefs, not through my beliefs at the world. You therefore understand something of the beliefs I hold but not what it is like to believe them, and hence you have not yet fully understood my beliefs *as I hold them*. But to understand my beliefs in this way, you must *believe* them.” More generally: To deeply understand S's belief that *p*, one must understand what it is *like* for S to believe that *p*, and to this end no amount of beliefs or knowledge *about p* or S or S's relation to *p* can substitute for actually *believing* that *p*.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, understanding what believing something is like seems to involve a certain kind of “know-how” (or “understanding-how”) which is not reducible to knowledge that or about, and arguably to have such know-how is to have the belief in question.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, achieving this deeper kind, level or degree of understanding seems vital in the context of religious pluralism, for at least two reasons: (1) Religious beliefs are typically more personally involving than non-religious ones, and understanding self-involving beliefs presses towards *sharing* those beliefs.<sup>19</sup> (2) Religious concepts are typically vague and open-textured, so that their application and use involves considerable skill and know-how; since this know-how is usually learned only through long and attentive participation in a religious community, its acquisition may be inextricable from the acquisition of the associated beliefs. Hence, for both reasons, if there is to be interreligious understanding at a sufficiently deep level, something very much like the production of actual beliefs—as opposed to beliefs about beliefs—seems necessary and desirable. So it is that I have programmed Plantinga's Box to ‘copy’ beliefs from Go to Al.

### III.

Now if, as I have argued, there are good reasons to think that Plantinga's Box can be made to work and that its function of producing beliefs is indispensable for achieving an important kind of interreligious understanding, let us go on to consider some of the major reasons Al might have for thinking

that he would do wrong to prefer any of our first six options over quitting the experiment.

First, three *epistemic* reasons: It seems that AI will lose truth, overload his cognitive system, and violate the conditions of proper basicity.

(A-1) In acquiring a new properly basic belief it is possible to lose the truth one already has, and this might seem to violate our epistemic duty not to deliberately lose whatever truth we may possess.

But, even assuming that AI's current properly basic beliefs are true, this duty does not prohibit use of the Box, because there are important qualifications to the duty: We are permitted to lose some truth while pursuing or gaining other truth if truth gained outweighs or compensates for truth lost, or if the odds are very good that we will improve our store of truth.<sup>20</sup> Hence at least several of the options open to AI are not necessarily wrong. By adding new properly basic beliefs without subtracting old ones, they set up a kind of internal doxastic market or competition. There is no guarantee, of course, that such competition will always yield good results.<sup>21</sup> Still, it does seem the best chance we have of gaining or ascertaining the truth *using our own noetic mechanisms*. If so, then AI may be right to risk whatever loss of truth using the Box involves, so long as he will be—or at any rate justifiably believes that he will be—adequately alethically compensated.

(A-2) One might simply overload one's finite cognitive system by acquiring more beliefs—or more complicated or complexly related beliefs—than one can handle. The system might fail to register certain crucial beliefs, might distort others, or might just crash. After all, how many beliefs can a finite human mind contain? In particular, how many different or even contradictory properly basic beliefs can one person tolerate within herself?

I think that these are valid questions, but they are not insuperable obstacles to using the Box. Even though I have *raised* these questions in an *apriori* way, I do not think that they can be *settled* by *apriori* arguments; they are empirical questions, which can (in principle) be answered only on the basis of actual experience, such as that which the Box provides.

(A-3) Most importantly, it seems that use of the Box violates the conditions under which a belief is *properly* basic. The argument goes something like this: To believe in the properly basic way is to be entirely within one's rational rights in so believing. But if it is right so to believe *p* then it is wrong to believe not-*p* (whether basically or not) while continuing to believe *p*. Moreover, it is wrong deliberately to set about to believe not-*p* or to cease to believe *p*. Furthermore, it is wrong to do these things even when one (knows that one) would come to believe not-*p* in the properly basic way at some later time and when so believing would be a good thing (e.g., because *p* is false).<sup>22</sup> So even if the outcome of using Plantinga's Box would be a good thing, it would be wrong to use the Box to achieve that outcome. Hence it seems that one can

*never* be justified in seeking deliberately to delete or subvert a properly basic belief.<sup>23</sup> Using the Box seems not only unjustified but prohibited.

But the force of this worry is blunted by the following considerations. First, the differences among religions need not involve outright logical inconsistencies among properly basic beliefs—where, say, a Christian properly basically believes and a Buddhist properly basically disbelieves the very same proposition. And if the differences are not formal inconsistencies but more like *apparent* incoherencies or incommensurabilities<sup>24</sup>, then the worry seems less a prohibition and more a warning.

Second, there may be an inconsistency but one doesn't see it in advance. Hence one might come to believe that not-p in a properly *non*-basic way because, unbeknownst to one, it is the logical consequence of other beliefs which one acquires in the properly basic way, and these beliefs subsequently produce or enable belief that not-p.

Third, even if there is an inconsistency which one recognizes, one need not *deliberately* seek it. Instead, while pursuing something else, or even while merely considering or entertaining not-p, one may end up with the inconsistent beliefs as an unsought side-consequence. But then there may be something like an epistemic principle of double effect: Perhaps one is justified in acquiring a properly basic belief, even though acquiring this belief has the foreseen or likely but unintended result that one also acquires inconsistent properly basic beliefs.<sup>25</sup>

Fourth, a person who believes that belief in p is properly basic for her and that belief in not-p is properly basic for someone else is in a peculiar, and possibly unstable, situation. Her belief that both beliefs, though inconsistent, are nonetheless equally rational may well move her in one of two directions: (i) She may question the rationality of his—or perhaps even the rationality of her own—beliefs, finding it hard to believe that both could be equally rational. (ii) She may question a conception of rationality that permits beliefs to be rationally justified for one person independently of (and indeed contrary to) the rational justification which others' beliefs have. Either movement will weaken the argument from proper basicity against using the Box.<sup>26</sup>

I conclude, therefore, that epistemic scruples *need* not prevent AI from trying on the electrodes, except perhaps in the (unlikely?) event that he *knows* that one of Go's properly basic beliefs is *logically inconsistent* with one of his own current properly basic beliefs.

#### IV.

Next, we turn to some *moral* reasons for avoiding the Box: It seems that Boxing will undermine AI's autonomy, sanity and motives.

(B-1) Plantinga's Box might enslave AI by destroying his autonomy, rendering him a helpless hypnotic unable to resist the Box's manipulations of

his doxastic system. Surely it would be morally wrong to choose to lose one's autonomy in this way.

However, I doubt the Box would have such deleterious effects, for Al would retain, in addition to his normal powers of deliberation and choice, all of his previous doxastic capacities. Once a belief, even a properly basic belief, is added by the Box, it is thereafter subject to removal or alteration by ordinary epistemic processes such as comparison with other beliefs, argument, testimony, forgetting, etc. So Al would be as epistemically free after the Box's operation as he was before—if not somewhat freer, since with the Box he could decide in advance *which* beliefs he wanted, or *how* his doxastic system should be transformed. Of course with epistemic freedom comes a certain unpredictability. After the Box cuts off there is no guarantee that its additions or alterations will remain, nor that its excisions will not return. In particular Al cannot predict whether after  $t_1$ , when he is introduced to Go's properly basic Buddhist beliefs—or they to him—he will continue as a Christian, will become a Buddhist, or will embrace or be driven to some third position. It all depends on the complicated inner adjustments of his cognitive system to the new beliefs, as well as on Al's further experience (itself in part a function of his new beliefs). But whatever the result it doesn't seem that Al's *autonomy* would necessarily be lost.<sup>27</sup>

(B-2) It might *cost* Al too much to gain Go's beliefs, where the "costs" are not so much time, energy and money (after all, the Box, like any imaginary device, is quick and cheap), but rather the confusion, trauma, incoherence, or insanity that might result from holding inconsistent, incompatible or at least vastly heterogeneous properly basic beliefs.<sup>28</sup> It seems morally wrong to purchase even important truth at such a personal cost.

But, once again, there are mitigations, because there are other possible, or likely, results: For some people it might be quite exciting, interesting or at any rate tolerable to entertain such wildly disparate beliefs; for others the hope or determination of winning through to new truth or to a deeper level of understanding might carry them through almost any chaos. So if a moral prohibition is involved, it would seem to be quite person-relative. Moreover, possessing the kind of important truth involved in religion would seem to matter more than being contented or clear-headed. So the psychological costs do not necessarily or decisively count against Al's trying the experiment.

(B-3) What possible motives could Al have for wanting to acquire Buddhist beliefs? Wouldn't the likeliest candidates be casual curiosity, intellectual voyeurism and self-insecurity? Aren't such motives morally reprehensible—a betrayal of Al's religious community and tradition?

But these rhetorical questions are inconclusive. Some, perhaps many, persons no doubt will have such discreditable motives, but some will not, and no one need have them, for there are perfectly legitimate reasons which might

inspire one to try out the Box: to seek truth, to want to know and love another person, to hope to understand another person's religious doxastic system, to desire a different perspective on and deeper understanding of one's own beliefs, and so on.

So the moral reasons, like the epistemic ones, do not necessarily make it wrong for AI to try the Box.

## V.

Finally, we turn to some *religious* reasons for not Boxing, which, since AI is a Christian, I will limit to a few clearly *Christian* reasons rooted in Scripture (I will comment on them later):

(C-1) Venturing beyond the truth which God has provided seems but to repeat Adam and Eve's original sin of disobedience: "You may eat from every tree in the garden, but not from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; for on the day that you eat from it, you will certainly die" (Gen. 2:16b-17, NEB). God, not Plantinga's Box, should provide whatever properly basic beliefs, and everything else, humans need—and *all* of what they need—for their own good.

(C-2) If Jesus Christ truly is "the way, the truth and the life" and "no one comes to the Father but by me" (Jn. 14:6, RSV), then any attempt to "try on" other properly basic beliefs would seem to be a form of apostasy, seeking saving truth apart from where it can alone be found, just where God provides it.

(C-3) Acquiring non-Christian properly basic beliefs, with the possible loss of distinctively Christian beliefs, seems to violate St. Paul's admonition to "guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us" (2Tim. 1:14, RSV).

(C-4) The risen Christ commanded his disciples to "Go forth to every part of the world, and proclaim the Good News to the whole creation. Those who believe it and receive baptism will find salvation; those who do not believe will be condemned" (Mk. 16:15-16, NEB; cf. Mt. 28:19). A follower of Christ would be disobedient if instead of, or in addition to, believing and proclaiming the Good News he believed and proclaimed the Four Noble Truths and trod the Eightfold Noble Path.<sup>29</sup>

For some properly basic Christians such considerations may well suffice for saying "no" to our little thought-experiment. But not for all, for there are strong Christian reasons to use the Box.

To seek important truth insofar as we can is a Christian as well as an epistemic and moral duty. Of course there are qualifications. One should not seek truth at the sacrifice of truth of comparable quantity or quality; one should not harm oneself in doing so, or at least not more seriously than one stands to benefit self or others; and one should not fail in other, equally

weighty or weightier duties. But when these qualifications are observed, the duty to seek truth seems to count strongly in favor of using Plantinga's Box at least to 'inquire' into the religious beliefs of others.

Moreover, truth is one—at least in the sense that any two true beliefs must be consistent.<sup>30</sup> That truth is one in this sense should be unproblematic to an orthodox Christian for whom God is one and God is truth. So Al has nothing to fear (from the standpoint of truth) in acquiring others' properly basic beliefs which he does not know in advance to be inconsistent with his current budget of properly basic beliefs. If no inconsistency results from the acquisition, truth has been added—or at least no truth has been lost—and there is no bar to having more. But if inconsistency does result, there might still be progress if Al does not (yet) know *which* belief, old or new, is false; at least he would then know where to focus his attention!<sup>31</sup>

What if, even though there is some truth in the properly basic beliefs of others, Al believes his own beliefs 'suffice unto salvation'? Would there be any point for him to acquire those other beliefs? Not if the truth others believe is only a (proper) subset of Al's own, for then Al's true beliefs are not only sufficient for him but also (at least in part) necessary for others. But what if the soteriological situation is symmetrical—what if others' true beliefs suffice for them just as Al's own true beliefs suffice for him? In such a case, seeing others' true beliefs 'from the inside' might at least lead Al to two important, and tolerance-tending, truths: (i) that the beliefs sufficient for oneself need not be necessary for another, and (ii) that the sufficiency of another's beliefs need not exclude the sufficiency of one's own.

Of course, Al might remain convinced that his current set of true beliefs—perhaps encapsulated in his properly basic beliefs—is *alone* salvific. Still, even so, the Box could be useful: by learning *about* another's properly basic beliefs—without necessarily believing them—one could, e.g., come to know her more intimately, thereby being inspired to know her more lovingly as well as enabled to love her more knowingly.

Finally, it is part and parcel of many Christians' trust in the final veracity, steadfastness and goodness of God to believe that God's truth can and will be found wherever it is sought (cf. Mt. 7:7)—perhaps even in the properly basic beliefs of Buddhists! Clinging obstinately to one's current set of properly basic beliefs may therefore be idolatry, substituting faith in proper basicity for faith in God.

I conclude that Al's specifically Christian reasons need not prohibit—and may in fact suggest—using the Box.

## VI.

Now to apply the considerations of the last three sections to a world in which there is what we might call "properly basic religious pluralism." It is

relatively easy, if not always edifying or peaceful, for incoherent or inconsistent sets of properly basic beliefs to coexist when they are held by distinct persons. This coexistence need not entail that one person arrogantly disregards or condescendingly dismisses the other's beliefs—he may simply *ignore* them, perhaps on the grounds that he is not his neighbor's epistemic keeper. This toleration via indifference, I take it, may well be our actual situation. But when divergent properly basic beliefs are internal to—i.e., believed by—a single person, the problems grow considerably more acute and insistent. It is then no longer a matter of reacting to the properly basic beliefs of others but a matter of reacting to *one's own* properly basic beliefs, and this can greatly affect one's sense of urgency. It is of course quite possible for someone to hold not merely unrelated but even inconsistent properly basic beliefs, at least so long as one doesn't recognize or care about the disconnection or inconsistency. But it strikes me as irrational to cling to supposedly properly basic beliefs which one sees are mutually inconsistent or incoherent, or, to a lesser degree, which seem to be without any intelligible interconnection.

Thus, while it may seem easy to cling to one's own distinctive properly basic religious beliefs in the face of the incompatible beliefs of others, there are strong pressures against having inconsistent, incoherent or unconnected properly basic beliefs internal to oneself. But Plantinga's Box makes others' properly basic beliefs internal to oneself. So if the Box is used, or should be used, the pressure grows to explore and to resolve any inconsistencies within the set of religious beliefs properly basic for anyone.<sup>32</sup> Not to use the Box when there are good reasons for using it, and no good reasons not to, seems to be a tacit admission of error or of lack of confidence in one's own properly basic beliefs.

My claim is not the epistemic one that incorporation of others' properly basic religious beliefs is a condition on the proper basicity of one's own basic religious beliefs, nor is it the moral claim that everyone ought, all things considered, to use the Box. Instead, I am asserting that for at least many properly basic Christians there are no good negative and there are some good positive reasons—though not necessarily over-riding ones—for using the Box. Such Christians should therefore worry about the apparently incompatible properly basic religious beliefs of others in a religiously pluralistic world.

## VII.

Where does this thought-experiment leave us? Its limitations are legion. For one, it doesn't show us whether different kinds of religious beliefs can or can't be properly basic, or whether any such beliefs *are* properly basic. For another, it doesn't rule out the possibility that different people can hold not merely different but *incompatible or inconsistent* religious beliefs, each

in a properly basic way. All that has been shown is that even if people do hold incompatible properly basic religious beliefs there are still good reasons for many Christians to use Plantinga's Box to help resolve the inconsistencies, and there are no overwhelming reasons for them not to do so.

But there is one final worry. Isn't using Plantinga's Box merely a 'theoretical' matter, since there are of course no such Boxes? No. Although we lack such high-tech Doxastic Deviation Devices, there are more traditional substitutes—the normal forms of interreligious dialogue: We may, e.g., read and try to understand each others' stories; we may sincerely speak and carefully listen to one another; we may work together on interpreting sacred texts, performing sacred rituals and enriching sacred symbols; we may participate in collaborative work on religious and non-religious projects; and we may even join for a time the other person's religious community, in order to 'try on' another's way of life in however truncated and inadequate a form. All of these are ways of 'copying,' more or less, the religious beliefs of others, and *they raise the very same questions raised by Plantinga's Box.*

So, while we may not be Boxed in, we do have the opportunity for interreligious dialogue, and that is enough. If it is not clearly wrong for Al not to use the Box, and if there are good reasons for him to use the Box, then there are good reasons for him to engage in interreligious dialogue. Interreligious inquiry is not precluded, and in fact may be prescribed, for many properly basic Christians.<sup>33</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Plantinga's position is elaborated in the following articles, among others: "Is Belief in God Rational?," in C. F. Delaney, ed., *Rationality and Religious Belief* (University of Notre Dame Studies in the Philosophy of Religion, #1; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), pp. 7-27; "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?," *NOUS*, 15 (March 1981), pp. 41-52; and "Reason and Belief in God," in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 16-93.

2. I am concerned only with beliefs which are properly basic for members of any *major* world religious tradition.

3. The device is named after Plantinga because I first heard of it from him, although he used it to make completely different points.

4. A few other features might be mentioned for the aficionado: **CONVERT** transforms belief that p into belief that not-p; it is one form of 'changing one's mind.' **TIME** is a timer for other functions; it allows one to set a duration after which the original function is cancelled, so far as that is possible. **CATEGORY** allows a function to deal with beliefs

pertaining to a certain specifiable category; there are 'semantic' and 'syntactic' knobs here, though perhaps this is redundant. The 'semantic' knob restricts the content of the belief to a given subject-matter; the 'syntactic' button enables one to specify meta-linguistically the desired range of logical subjects and predicates for the sentential expressions of the 'objects' of beliefs. An elaborate set of **RELATION** dials takes two or more propositions believed and converts them into a new relational belief, in various ways. E.g., with the inputs of belief that p and belief that q, one could dial up the belief that p implies q, or the belief that p is consistent with q, etc. Since the relation function can be reiterated, one can acquire e.g. the belief that one's belief that p and q are consistent is implied by the belief that p implies q, and so on. —Once again I must stop, before our epistemic engine becomes an epistemological tool-factory.

5. We needn't worry about *which* beliefs they are, for that would involve us in endless controversies over Orthodoxy, which is not our present concern. If need be we can simply *stipulate* that Al is a Christian and that in our thought-experiment we are solely concerned with his *Christian* beliefs, whichever ones those are.

6. The formula is Plantinga's; cf. e.g. "Reason and Belief in God," p. 17.

7. Once again, worries about which specific Buddhist beliefs Go holds—or even which *kind* of Buddhist beliefs he has—are not germane. In fact, all that really matters for the questions I wish to consider is that Go have *some* properly basic religious beliefs which Al lacks and which are neither entailed by nor clearly compatible with Al's beliefs. But it is perhaps most interesting to make these beliefs non-Christian ones to heighten the apparent incompatibility.

8. What if Go's properly basic beliefs, when copied into Al, just become Al's beliefs, but not his *properly basic* beliefs? Surely a belief that is properly basic for one person need not be or become properly basic for another person, even when the second person gets that belief from the first. Plantinga's Box can handle such worries. The **COPY** function can be adjusted so that it takes a belief from one person and copies it into another person in any one of three modes: (i) as a *properly basic belief* for the second person, (ii) as a *basic but not properly basic belief* for that person, or (iii) as a *non-basic belief* for that person. Our version of the Box, therefore, for the current run of experiments has been set in the first mode.

9. Actually there is another set of what might be called parallel "Buddhist" options for Al, where Al's original Christian properly basic beliefs are completely excised or retained only in memory after  $t_2$  and his acquired Buddhist properly basic beliefs are either remembered or actually present. I ignore these options because the experiment is not supposed to *directly* make Al into a Buddhist, even if as an *unforeseen and indirect result* Al becomes a Buddhist or ceases to be a Christian. I just want to see whether, from Al's current *Christian* standpoint, it would be right or wrong for Al to enter into an experiment where he would encounter—or rather incorporate—Go's Buddhist beliefs without necessarily losing his own Christian properly basic ones.

10. There are other and possibly even more interesting questions which I cannot address here: For one, independently of whether or not it is wrong to add some properly basic Buddhist beliefs, would adding them nonetheless be good, commendable, admirable or otherwise desirable? For another, could participation in the experiment just be a permissible but arbitrary choice, rather like a matter of taste?

11. Cf. Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 78-82.

12. I owe this point to John Glenn. Incidentally, Plantinga is not clear about the *kind* of experience needed to ground a properly basic belief. An experiential ground may be (i) a special experience, an experience with a particular content; (ii) a special kind or type of experience; (iii) generic or widespread experience viewed or had in a special way; (iv) an experiential set or readiness to have experience in either of the first three senses; or perhaps even (v) the "experience" of undergoing the production of the properly basic belief in a certain way. (Could production of a belief by Plantinga's Box itself count as a ground for the belief produced?)

13. Of course, understanding the religious like of another person involves much more than merely understanding his or her *beliefs*, but we cannot take up these larger issues here.

14. I am indebted to John Glenn and especially to Bill Alston for insisting on the need to address such questions.

15. What follows is obviously not a complete analysis of the concept of understanding, but I hope it suffices for the issue at hand.

16. Cf. Thomas Nagel, "What is it like to be a bat?," Ch. 12 in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). In his preface to this volume, Nagel says that "to create understanding, philosophy must *convince*. That means it must produce or destroy belief, rather than merely provide us with a consistent set of things to say" (p. xi).

17. In order to understand even more deeply another's belief in all its rich concreteness, must you not also come to believe *as the other does*—e.g., perhaps with her degree of tentativeness or conviction, or with her associated feelings, etc.? If so, Plantinga's Box would need further supplementation. But that such a deeper level of understanding is possible or desirable for some purposes does not detract from the point I am making here about the need to understand what it is like to hold the religious properly basic beliefs of others.

18. One might also argue that in order fully to understand S's properly basic belief *as properly basic for S*, one needs not merely to know about but also to possess S's associated experiential ground.

19. Cf. Donald Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement* (The Library of Philosophy and Theology; London: SCM Press, 1963).

20. We might not *know* the odds, or whether gain or loss is greater, until after trying the Box, and then perhaps it would be too late if we made the wrong choice. Still, one can be antecedently justified in *risking* loss of truth in order to pursue (possibly or probably) greater truth. Much depends upon a subjective assessment of the risks and values involved, however.

21. Mark Nelson has pointed out to me that unfettered doxastic competition, like unregulated economic markets, may be both unfair and inefficient due to external or internal inadequacies. In theological terms, our way may be blocked by Satan or by sin.

22. I owe the forceful expression of this point to George Mavrodes.

23. Note that there are many ways to tamper with a properly basic belief other than simply deleting it. One simple way is just to add an inconsistent or contrary properly basic belief and see what happens.

24. I think this latter is indeed the case with Al's theism and with Go's (and most of his relatives') non-theism, but I cannot argue this point here.

25. Some complications that can only be noted here: What are the *chances* of retaining one's old properly basic beliefs while adding some new ones, or of replacing old ones with new and better ones? Does it matter *how many* properly basic beliefs are at risk, as well as the *levels and kinds* of risk? Would one be justified in clinging to a *single* highly-treasured properly basic belief even though it prevents one from acquiring a large number of other important properly basic beliefs?

26. These points were suggested to me by Peg Falls.

27. Similar remarks could be made about Al's personal identity and moral integrity in relation to acquiring Go's properly basic Buddhist beliefs, but there is not space to make them here.

28. Could someone in such a state still reasonably hold that all of his very diverse beliefs were *properly basic*?

29. This way of stating the point was suggested to me by Minor Rogers.

30. I assume here that any two beliefs are *commensurable* in the sense that either they are consistent or they are inconsistent—there is no third alternative—so that two beliefs are inconsistent if and only if they are not consistent. If some beliefs could be incommensurable in this sense, then there might be a weaker sense of the dictum that truth is one: no two true beliefs are inconsistent (though they need not be consistent).

31. Further, of course, if truth is one in some stronger or more extended sense—e.g., if all true beliefs must cohere or form a system—then there will be additional incentive for Al to use Plantinga's Box.

32. Since there are obvious technical difficulties, even with Plantinga's Box, in collating *everyone's* properly basic beliefs, it seems to follow that no one has the obligation to do so. But it doesn't follow from this that no one is under *any* obligation to explore at least *some* other such beliefs, much less that one ought not or need not explore *any* of them.

33. Earlier versions of this paper were read at the Eastern Regional Meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers in Dayton, OH, April 10, 1987, and the Society for Philosophy of Religion, Charleston, SC, March 3, 1988. For helpful comments and criticism, I am indebted especially to William P. Alston, but also to Harlan Beckley, John Elrod, Peg Falls, John D. Glenn, Jr., John Hick, Jim Keller, George Mavrodes, Mark Nelson, Ann Rogers and Minor Rogers.