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David Basinger

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PLANTINGA, PLURALISM AND JUSTIFIED RELIGIOUS BELIEF

David Basinger

According to Alvin Plantinga, it has been widely held since the Enlightenment that if theistic beliefs are to be considered rational, they must be based on propositional evidence. It is not enough for the theist just to refute objections. The theist "must also have something like an argument for [such a] belief, or some positive reason to think that the belief is true."¹ But this is incorrect, Plantinga argues. Basic beliefs are beliefs not based on propositional evidence; such beliefs are "properly basic in a set of circumstances" if they can be so affirmed in those circumstances "without either violating an epistemic duty or displaying some kind of noetic defect."² And, according to Plantinga, theistic beliefs can be properly basic. For example, he argues that "under widely realized conditions it is perfectly rational, reasonable, intellectually respectable and acceptable to believe there is such a person as God without believing it on the basis of evidence—propositional evidence vs. the kind instanced by 'the evidence of the senses'."³

But can a properly basic belief such as this have any epistemic credibility (warrant) if it is not conferred by other propositions whose epistemic status is not in question? Yes, Plantinga replies. There are two significantly different ways in which a proposition can acquire warrant. There is propositional warrant—warrant conferred by an evidential line of reasoning from other beliefs. However, there is also nonpropositional warrant.

[We have] cognitive faculties designed to enable us to achieve true beliefs with respect to a wide variety of propositions—propositions about our immediate environment, about our interior lives, about the thoughts and experiences of other persons, about our universe at large, about right and wrong, about the whole realm of abstracta—numbers, properties, propositions, states of affairs, possible worlds and their like, about modality—what is necessary and possible—and about [ourselves]. These faculties work in such a way that under the appropriate circumstances we form the appropriate belief. More exactly, the appropriate belief is formed in us; in the typical case we do not decide to hold or form the belief in question, but simply find ourselves with it. Upon considering an instance of *modus ponens*, I find myself believing its corresponding conditional; upon being appeared to in the familiar way, I find myself holding the belief that there is a large tree before me; upon being asked what I had for breakfast, I reflect for a moment and then find myself



with the belief that what I had was eggs on toast. In these and other cases I do not decide what to believe; I don't total up the evidence (I'm being appeared to redly; on most occasions when thus appeared to I am in the presence of something red; so most probably in this case I am) and make a decision as to what seems best supported; I simply find myself believing.⁴

And from a theistic point of view, Plantinga continues, the same is true in the religious realm. Just as it is true that when our senses or memory is functioning properly, "appropriate belief is formed in us," so it is that God has also created us with faculties which will, "when they are working in the way they were designed to work by the being who designed and created us and them," produce true theistic beliefs.⁵ Moreover, if these faculties are functioning properly, a basic theistic belief thus formed "has positive epistemic status to the degree [the individual in question finds herself] inclined to accept it."⁶

But what of the alleged counterevidence to theistic beliefs? What, for example, of all the arguments which conclude that the theist has no justifiable basis for believing in God? Can they all be dismissed as irrelevant? Not immediately, answers Plantinga. We must seriously consider alleged defeaters of our basic beliefs. We must, for instance, seriously consider the claim that religious belief is mere wish fulfillment and the claim that God's existence is incompatible with (or at least improbable given) the amount of evil in the world. But to undercut such defeaters, we need not engage in positive apologetics: produce propositional evidence for our beliefs. Only "negative apologetics"—the refutation of such arguments—"is required to defeat...defeaters."⁷

Moreover, it is Plantinga's conviction that such defeater defeaters do normally exist. With respect to belief in God's existence, for example, he maintains that "the nonpropositional warrant enjoyed by [a person's] belief in God [seems] itself sufficient to turn back the challenge offered by some alleged defeaters"—e.g., the claim that theistic belief is mere wish fulfillment. And other defeaters such as the "problem of evil," he adds, can be undercut by identifying validity or soundness problems or even by appealing to the fact that "experts think it is unsound, or that the experts are evenly divided as to its soundness."⁸ Thus, even considering all the seeming evidence against God's existence and other theistic beliefs, Plantinga is still inclined to believe that at least some such beliefs are "properly basic for most theists—even intellectually sophisticated adult theists."⁹

There is much that Plantinga says with which I agree. His contention that many individuals simply discover theistic beliefs formed in them seems to me to be correct. Philosophers and theologians have for millennia discussed the 'evidence' for and against various theistic beliefs. But it is doubtful that many theists initially acquire theistic beliefs on the basis of such evidential discussions. Many, if not most, appear to have just found themselves with the inclination to affirm such beliefs.

And his contention that such beliefs are generated by divinely created religious belief-forming faculties which produce beliefs in a manner analogous to our visual and moral belief-forming faculties also seems acceptable. Of course, those who believe there is no God will not believe that any of our belief-forming faculties are divinely created. But Plantinga only claims that this is what he and other theists believe to be the case. Thus, in a day when a 'convincing' refutation of God's existence seems less likely than ever, Plantinga's qualified contention appears safe.

In fact, if we drop consideration of the origin of the faculties in question, Plantinga seems to be offering us a very plausible description of how certain theistic beliefs *are* in fact initially formed in many theists. Few deny that we have 'visual faculties' which receive external data—e.g., light reflected off a tree—process such data, produce in us visual images expressible by propositions such as "I am being appeared to treely," and then incline us to believe certain things—e.g., that there actually is a tree in front of us. And, analogously, it seems quite plausible to believe that many humans possess 'faculties' (whether or not they are held to be 'mental' and/or 'physical' and whether or not they are held to be divinely and/or naturally created) which receive external data—for example, encounter the starry heavens—process such data, and then produce both the religious concepts expressible by propositions such as "God exists" or "God has spoken to me" and the inclination to believe these propositions to be true.

However, I shall argue that the undeniable existence of pervasive religious pluralism places knowledgeable theists under a *prima facie* obligation to do more than engage in negative apologetics. It requires such theists to *attempt* to produce positive evidence for their religious beliefs. And I shall then discuss the implications of this fact for Plantinga's claim that some theistic beliefs are "properly basic for most theists—even intellectually sophisticated adult theists."

I

It seems to me that the essence of Plantinga's model of belief justification can be captured in what I shall label his Negative Apologetical Thesis (NAT).

NAT: For a theist to be in a position to maintain justifiably that the basic religious beliefs formed by her religious faculties are properly basic—i.e., to be in a position to maintain justifiably that her basic formed beliefs are true even though she has no "positive reason" to think they are true—she is only obligated to defend herself against the claim that her religious faculties are not functioning properly—i.e., are not functioning as they are intended to function or are not producing true beliefs.

Or, to be even more explicit about those aspects of NAT with which this paper will be concerned, it seems to me that Plantinga is making two related, but distinct, claims about negative apologetics. He is claiming that a theist is not

obligated to produce independent evidence for the beliefs that her faculties have formed. And he appears to be claiming that she is also not obligated to establish the reliability of her own religious faculties—i.e., he is claiming that she can assume the reliability of her own religious faculties until they are proven faulty.

But why accept NAT? Specifically, why should a theist assume her religious faculties are reliable until proven unreliable rather than assume such faculties are unreliable until proven reliable? The most popular argument for this aspect of NAT—and one to which Plantinga seems at times at least implicitly to be appealing—can be called the General Reliability Argument (GRA). We as humans, it is held, are naturally endowed with a considerable number of belief-forming faculties. As a result, many of us simply find ourselves believing we are ‘seeing’ a tree or believing that we had eggs yesterday or believing we have a headache or believing that from the conjunction of (a then b) and (a), (b) follows or believing God exists. Now, in general, we cannot prove that such formed beliefs are true and, thus, on this basis, that our faculties are reliable. Some of the greatest philosophical minds—e.g., Descartes and Hume—have tried but with a notable lack of success. But the onus is not on us to furnish such proof. We all rely on these faculties daily, and in general they serve us quite well. In fact the assumed reliability of such faculties serves as the basis for some of our most noncontroversial examples of ‘knowledge’. So our basic stance toward such faculties—including our ‘religious’ faculties—should be to assume they are ‘innocent until proven guilty’.

In short, the argument is that since we as humans can justifiably assume, without proof, that religious faculties in general are reliable, an individual theist can justifiably assume, without proof, that her own religious faculties are reliable until proven otherwise.

Now with respect to most of our human faculties—e.g., our visual faculties—GRA seems noncontroversially true. But can our ‘religious faculties’ be considered appropriately analogous to our other faculties in this context? Or, to put the question in its more useful form, is there any reason not to assume that religious faculties are as reliable as visual or auditory or inferential faculties?

When considering the formed beliefs of many individuals in specific, homogeneous cultural contexts, the answer to this latter question would appear to be no. For, in these contexts, all of the faculties in question appear to function in an analogous manner: they all produce consensus. That is, it is not only the case that most individuals in such cultural contexts find the same basic visual and inferential and auditory beliefs being formed in them; they also find the same basic religious beliefs being formed in them. Thus, such individuals quite justifiably assume that their religious faculties are as reliable as the others.

However, when we survey the 'world scene', a major difficulty arises. The problem, of course, is that on a world-wide scale, religious faculties consistently and pervasively produce a myriad of different, often incompatible, basic religious beliefs.

For instance, such faculties produce no common conception of God. Most theists conceive of God as a 'supreme being' in some sense. But there is little consensus on such a being's essential characteristics. While some find themselves believing in the existence of a being who is 'personal', others do not. Rather, they find themselves believing either that God is some sort of impersonal force or that God is simply the sum total of all there is. And while some find themselves believing that God is the sole, unilateral creator and controller of all, others find themselves believing that God can unilaterally create or control nothing. All reality, they maintain, is always co-creative. In fact, the 'religious' faculties of some individuals produce disbelief in the existence of any sort of 'supreme being'.

Now, of course, such divergence can be explained in part by the fact that many individuals have never observed human activity outside of their own culture or have not been exposed to alternative theistic and nontheistic perspectives or have not seriously analyzed them. However, even among those knowledgeable individuals who have considered roughly the same data, nothing close to a basic consensus has emerged. Their visual faculties generally produce similar visual beliefs in similar settings. Their memories draw forth similar beliefs in similar settings. And their introspective and inferential faculties frequently produce similar beliefs in similar contexts. But their religious faculties simply do not.

In short, pervasive religious pluralism brings into serious question whether we ought to consider religious faculties to be analogous to other belief-forming faculties in the way GRA suggests. The existence of such pluralism gives us no reason to deny that religious faculties *produce* beliefs in us in a manner analogous to the way visual or auditory faculties produce beliefs. But since the reason we do not question the reliability of most of our faculties is that such faculties consistently generate similar beliefs in most individuals, the fact that religious faculties do not, in general, produce similar beliefs in similar contexts does make it much more difficult to assume they possess the same sort of reliability status. That is, this lack of consensus in the religious realm makes it difficult to assume that religious faculties, in general, produce true beliefs. And if this is so, then, of course, GRA is greatly weakened (I personally believe defeated) as a justification for affirming NAT—or, more specifically, is greatly weakened as a basis for assuming that we need only defend our religious belief-forming faculties against the claim that they are unreliable.

It will not help here, it must be explicitly noted, to move to the religious version of GRA to which Plantinga explicitly appeals: our human faculties—

including our religious faculties—can be assumed innocent until proven guilty because they “have been designed, no doubt, with reliability in mind” by an all-powerful, all knowing creator.¹⁰ This changes the ‘origin’ of the alleged reliability. But the same problem remains. How can religious faculties justifiably be assumed to possess the same degree of reliability as that granted other belief-forming faculties when religious faculties do not produce consensus in a manner analogous to the others?

If I am correct, where does this leave the proponent of NAT? If she is no longer in a position to assume that *her own* religious belief-forming faculties are reliable because religious faculties, in general, can justifiably be assumed to be so, must she now abandon this aspect of Plantinga’s negative thesis? She might conclude that she must. That is, she might conclude that, in the absence of some helpful version of GRA, she must now do more than simply defend herself against attacks on the reliability of her own religious faculties, which is all that NAT requires. She might decide that each theist must now independently *establish* the reliability of her own religious faculties—independently identify positive reasons for believing her own faculties are reliable—before she can justifiably claim that the religious beliefs they form are properly basic.

However, in Plantinga’s own words, to believe one must have “some positive reason to think” a belief is true is to be an evidentialist. Thus, although to abandon NAT in this manner is not to become an evidentialist with respect to the beliefs one’s religious faculties have formed, it is to become an evidentialist with respect to the other aspect of Plantinga’s negative apologetical thesis: the reliability status on one’s own religious faculties.

This is not to say, it must be explicitly emphasized, that Plantinga ought not, himself, be viewed as an evidentialist in *any* sense. He does appear to view GRA (in its religious and/or natural version) as a form of evidence—as a positive reason—for holding certain opinions about our formed beliefs. Specifically he seems to see GRA as a basis for claiming that a theist can assume her religious beliefs to be ‘innocent until proven guilty’—i.e., as a reason for believing each theist need not independently establish the reliability of her religious faculties. But the proponent of the line of reasoning in question, on the other hand, sees the inadequacy of GRA as a reason to believe each theist does need to establish independently the reliability of her religious faculties. Thus, this theist has now become an evidentialist in the exact sense Plantinga claims in NAT she need not.

It might be argued, however, that the proponent of NAT ought not give up so easily. The existence of pervasive religious pluralism does seriously challenge any version of GRA as a justification for the affirmation of NAT. But the burden of proof still lies with the critic. We may not have good reasons for holding that religious faculties are in general reliable. But it is still the

case for any given theist that, unless it can be established that her specific religious faculties are in fact unreliable, she remains wholly justified in maintaining that her formed beliefs are properly basic—can be affirmed without positive evidence. In short, it might be argued that a theist can still justifiably affirm Plantinga's negative apologetical thesis, even if she can no longer justifiably appeal to some version of GRA.

It seems to me, though, that this line of reasoning is unacceptable. The existence of pervasive pluralism does challenge, and I think defeat, any version of GRA designed to allow us to assume the general reliability of religious faculties. But I believe that such pluralism *also* functions as a *direct* challenge to the affirmation of NAT itself—as a direct challenge to the claim that to defend the proper basicity of our formed religious beliefs, we need only *defend* ourselves against attacks on such beliefs and the faculties which have produced them. An illustration related to another type of belief-forming faculty may be helpful. Let us assume that Tom and Bill, both students in the same Introduction to Philosophy class, are discussing a forthcoming exam. What soon emerges is that, while Tom believes the exam is on Friday, Bill believes it is on the following Monday. Before their discussion neither had any reason to doubt he was correct. Both had been in class the day the exam date was announced, and neither had previously had any reason to believe his auditory faculties or memory was not functioning properly.

But what is the proper epistemological response now that a conflict has arisen? An improper response, obviously, would be for either Bill or Tom to assume immediately that his faculties had, in fact, not functioned in a reliable manner and, thus, that his formed belief ought no longer be considered true. And the same, I believe, holds in the religious realm. It is undeniably the case, for instance, that Christians or Hindus or Buddhists often find the religious beliefs formed in them to be incompatible with the religious beliefs formed in the members of other religious groups. But this fact alone is not a justifiable reason for a proponent of any given religious perspective to assume immediately that her religious faculties are, in fact, unreliable and thus that the beliefs formed by such faculties ought no longer be affirmed.¹¹

Does this mean, accordingly, that the knowledgeable theist who becomes aware of the pervasively pluralistic nature of religious beliefs is under no greater epistemic obligation than before? Can it be argued that since the existence of religious pluralism is not a sound reason for giving up any specific theistic belief, the theist can justifiably dismiss further consideration of this phenomenon and simply continue to assume her religious faculties are producing beliefs which are properly basic—i.e., can justifiably continue to maintain that her formed beliefs can be affirmed without positive evidence.

I do not think so. Conflicts between beliefs produced by other faculties, we all know from experience, *sometimes* occur because one of the faculties

was not functioning properly. For example, two students have sometimes 'heard' different test dates because one had an ear infection or wax in his ear or was taking a prescription drug which had affected his hearing and/or memory. Moreover, we also know from experience that such conflicts can *at times* be resolved by further investigation. For example, students can usually resolve a conflict of the type under discussion simply by calling the instructor. Accordingly, *if the goal is to maximize 'truth' and minimizing 'error'*, then all parties are, I believe, under a *prima facie* obligation to attempt to resolve such conflicts.

Now, of course, students may not always be interested in determining exactly when an exam is to be given. Perhaps they have already studied or plan not to study. But most theists (and nontheists) do claim to be interested in affirming 'truth' and avoiding 'error'. Thus, the existence of pervasive pluralism—the fact that seemingly reliable religious faculties continually produce incompatible religious beliefs—does, I believe place the knowledgeable theist under the type of *prima facie* epistemic obligation in question.

It must be emphasized, of course, that such an obligation is *prima facie*. There may be many legitimate reasons why it cannot in fact immediately or ever be discharged. A theist, for instance, may not have the time or resources to investigate further. Moreover, I do not believe that the mere existence of this obligation need have any immediate bearing on the epistemic status of a theist's formed beliefs.¹² This is not to say, of course, that a theist who becomes aware of religious pluralism may not, in fact, find herself less inclined to affirm certain formed beliefs. And information uncovered during an attempt to resolve the conflict in question may well lead a theist to believe she is now more or less justified in affirming her formed religious beliefs than she was initially. However, the mere recognition of the existence of the obligation in question does not itself require her to modify her epistemic attitude toward her formed beliefs.

But I *am* arguing that once the theist becomes aware of the pluralistic challenge, she can no longer justifiably choose to retain a purely defensive posture. Or stated differently, *I am arguing* that the knowledgeable theist cannot justifiably claim that because the existence of pervasive pluralism does not require her to abandon her formed beliefs, she is under no obligation to consider the matter further. If she desires to determine the 'truth' of the matter to the extent possible, she is obligated, in principle, to engage in further investigation. The arena of positive apologetics must at least be entered. The game of 'negative apologetics' will no longer be enough.

Or, to put all this more explicitly into the language of NAT, the existence of pervasive pluralism is not a sufficient reason for believing that any given theist's formed beliefs are false or that her belief-forming faculties are unreliable. Nor, as we shall see, is the existence of such pluralism a sufficient

reason in every case to deny that our formed religious beliefs can ultimately be considered properly basic. But religious pluralism does challenge the assumption that a theist need only defend her formed beliefs and the reliability of the faculties which have produced them to preserve the proper basicity of such beliefs. The knowledgeable theist, I am arguing, is obligated to attempt to resolve the pluralistic conflict—enter the arena of positive apologetics—*before* any ‘final’ decision concerning the epistemic status of her formed religious beliefs can be made.

What if someone refuses to attempt to meet this obligation? This, of course, is not relevant to the question of whether formed beliefs can or cannot, in principle, be considered properly basic. But for a given theist to purposely violate the duty in question does mean, I believe, that she has forfeited her right to claim that her formed beliefs are properly basic. For, as Plantinga himself has told us, basic beliefs can only be considered properly basic if they can be affirmed without “violating an epistemic duty.” And the theist in question has in essence chosen not to attempt to maximize truth and minimize error and has, thus, violated one of the basic criteria for epistemically rational behavior.¹³

II

Let us assume that I am correct. This raises two distinct, but related questions. Can the pluralistic challenge be resolved? That is, can we determine which set of formed religious beliefs is true or most worthy of affirmation? And either way, can a theist justifiably continue to maintain that her formed beliefs are properly basic—i.e., can she justifiably continue to affirm such beliefs without possessing positive reasons for believing they are true?

We will consider potential modes of resolution first. In what ways might the theist attempt to resolve the problem posed by religious pluralism? That is, in what ways might a theist attempt to improve her epistemic position in the debate? Further exploration of our student scenario may be helpful in this respect. If Tom and Bill really do desire to determine which, if either, has correctly remembered the day of the next exam, there are two basic approaches available.

The first is to turn their attention directly to the formed beliefs in question. The most promising possibility along these lines would be to check with the instructor directly or at least see if the instructor has listed the test dates in the course syllabus. But this approach will obviously be of little value in attempting to resolve the challenge of religious pluralism. What makes this method of conflict resolution so promising in our student scenario is the fact that Tom and Bill agree on the identity of their instructor, agree that the syllabus in question was produced by this person and agree that they will be able to arrive at a mutually acceptable interpretation of what the syllabus

indicates concerning this matter. However, the very basis for the problem of religious pluralism under consideration is, at least in part, the fact that we as humans cannot seem to agree on the 'identity' of the being who can justifiably be labeled 'God' (or even agree that any such being exists). Moreover, even among those who do 'believe in God', there is no agreement on which set of writings, if any, can justifiably be considered an authoritative communication from this being. And finally, even among those who affirm the same divinely inspired, written revelation, there is often little agreement on what is actually said on important issues.

There remains, however, other means by which Tom and Bill can attempt to assess their conflicting beliefs. If Tom and Bill aren't able to contact the instructor or find a syllabus, they might contact other students who had attended class on the day the date for the exam in question was announced. If all those contacted are in agreement with either Tom or Bill, then the issue will for all practical purposes be settled. But, of course, this method will also be of little value in the religious context since the pluralistic challenge only exists, at least in part, because no consensus of the requisite type has emerged.

Finally, if Tom and Bill are also not able to contact a sufficient number of class members, they might attempt to construct some sort of evidential argument intended to establish directly the correct date. For example, they might attempt to discover if all the previous exams have been given on a certain day of the week and use this as an objective evidential standard for resolving the conflict.

Now, of course, this approach has in fact often been employed in discussions of religious pluralism. Many have given serious consideration to those independent arguments for or against the 'formed' beliefs in question—e.g., those arguments for or against the existence of the Judeo-Christian God or the claim that we as humans can communicate with such a being. And this approach has, in principle, the greatest potential for objectively resolving the conflict in question. In fact historically, many theists have thought the pluralistic conflict can in this manner be resolved. That is, they have firmly believed that sound arguments do establish that the beliefs formed by the faculties of one set of religious individuals are alone true. Even today, many philosophers and theologians believe that the consideration of such arguments can help us clarify issues and possibly 'weed out' certain religious beliefs which are inconsistent or in other ways defective. However, few philosophers and theologians—especially those such as Plantinga in the analytic tradition—now believe that there exists any argument supporting a given set of specific theistic beliefs which obligates all who consider it to accept its conclusion.

However, might there not at least be some way in which a theist can justifiably establish the truth of her formed beliefs for herself? That is, might

it not be the case that, although she cannot produce arguments which obligate all individuals to acknowledge that the religious beliefs which have been formed in her are more worthy of affirmation than those incompatible beliefs produced by the faculties of others, she can at least establish that *she* is justified in believing her own formed beliefs are most worthy of affirmation? One possibility along this line presents itself.

Many theists, someone might argue, believe that God has produced an external epistemic standard by which we can judge our formed beliefs. Many Judeo-Christians, for instance, believe the Bible to be the ultimate epistemic standard in relation to which believers not only can, but must, assess the 'accuracy' of their formed beliefs. Now, of course, such an evaluation tool cannot be used to resolve the pluralistic challenge in an objective, 'public' sense. But it can be used justifiably by a theist to resolve the pluralistic challenge in a personal, 'private' sense. That is, a theist who accepts the epistemic authority of this external standard can justifiably cite consistency with this standard as a basis for believing that only those formed beliefs consistent with her own are true. In one sense, this line of reasoning seems quite plausible. If we grant a theist her independent grounds for believing not only that her God exists and has created her with religious belief-forming faculties but also that this being has produced an authoritative written and/or natural epistemic standard, then there appears to be little reason, in principle, not to grant that she could justifiably use such a standard to attempt to resolve the pluralistic challenge for herself.

But this line of reasoning generates a negative response to the other question with which we are presently concerned: the question of whether, in the face of religious pluralism, a theist's formed religious beliefs can still be considered properly basic. For if the consideration of the pluralistic challenge has led a theist to believe that she must assess her 'formed beliefs' by an independent epistemic standard before she can justifiably accept them as true, then, of course, such beliefs can no longer be considered basic. Whatever positive epistemic status such beliefs *now* possess is based primarily on the theist's independent grounds for the acceptance of the assessment standard in question. In short, such a theist has now clearly become an evidentialist.

But there are, as mentioned earlier, *two* basic approaches available to those attempting to resolve epistemic conflicts of the type under consideration. One can, as we have seen, attempt to establish directly that one set of formed beliefs is true. But one can also turn one's attention to the reliability of the faculties in question. That is, one can attempt to find reasons for supposing that one's belief-forming faculties are working better than one's rivals. For example, Bill and Tom might try to assess the reliability of their belief-forming faculties by attempting to determine whether either had stayed up too late

the night before the relevant class or had been taking some form of medication or had been talking to another student when the announcement was made.

This approach, of course, has also often been employed by those attempting to resolve the challenge of religious pluralism. Many theists have argued, for instance, that their opponents have faculties which have been damaged by 'the fall' or are under the control of some evil force or have been desensitized by too much interaction with 'worldly' concerns. But, not surprisingly, those criticized in this manner do not agree. In fact, they criticize the reliability of their opponents' faculties on exactly the same grounds. And I can see no objective, nonquestion-begging basis for determining which, if any, of the parties in this debate is correct.

But cannot the theist at least use this approach to attempt to resolve the pluralistic challenge for herself? It will, of course, not help her in this context to make any sort of appeal to the reliability of religious belief-forming faculties in general. It won't help her, for example, to argue with Plantinga that she as a theist can trust her own faculties because she has good reasons to believe they "have been designed, no doubt, with reliability in mind" by an all-powerful, all-knowing creator.¹⁴ Such reliability, if established, only exacerbates the pluralistic challenge. For the better the reasons we have for assuming that religious faculties are, in general, reliable, the harder it becomes to make sense of the fact that such faculties generate such a wide variety of often incompatible beliefs.

But what if a theist maintains that she has what she considers to be adequate reasons for believing that the religious faculties of only a small subset of individuals (herself included) function reliably? What if she maintains, for example, that she has good reasons to believe that the 'fall' tainted the religious faculties of all but a select few (herself included), whose faculties God has chosen to reinfuse with reliability. As stated earlier, she will certainly not be able to establish this fact in an objective, public sense. But if we grant her this contention, can't she then justifiably argue that the problem of pluralism has been resolved for her personally? And, more importantly, can't she also justifiably contend that her formed religious beliefs retain their proper basicity?

I believe the answer to both questions is yes. If we grant a theist the exclusivity thesis in question, then I see no reason to deny she has justifiably resolved the pluralistic challenge for herself. And she has done so without appealing to arguments whose conclusions are the formed beliefs in question. She has done so rather by establishing the epistemic superiority of the belief-forming faculties from which the beliefs in question have come. Thus, I believe such formed beliefs can justifiably be considered basic—i.e., not themselves based on propositional evidence. And since she has met her ob-

ligation to attempt to resolve the pluralistic challenge, I believe these basic beliefs can be considered properly basic.

However, by approaching the pluralistic challenge in this manner, our theist has in a very important, anti-Plantingan sense again become an evidentialist. The proponent of NAT, remember, does not believe she is obligated to produce propositional evidence for her formed beliefs. Nor, more importantly, does she feel obligated to establish the reliability of her own belief-forming faculties—i.e., she believes she can justifiably assume her own religious faculties are innocent until proven guilty. But the theist in question acknowledges that the pluralistic challenge obligates her to do more than simply defend her own religious faculties. She believes she must establish the ‘epistemic superiority’ of her faculties. Moreover, she believes she has identified positive reasons for doing so—i.e., for maintaining that her belief-forming faculties are superior to those of her opponents. Thus, since to be an evidentialist in this context, remember, is to be someone who thinks we must have “some positive reason to think” a belief is true, our theist has again entered the evidentialist camp in a sense incompatible with one aspect of Plantinga’s negative apologetical thesis.

Where, then, does all this leave the knowledgeable theist who has discovered no compelling ‘public’ or ‘private’ evidential basis for resolving the pluralistic challenge? That is, where does this leave the theist who can find no compelling public or private evidential basis for holding either that her specific beliefs alone are true or that her faculties are superior? Is there any nonevidential manner in which she can resolve the pluralistic challenge for herself while continuing to maintain justifiably that her formed beliefs are properly basic?

I believe the answer to this question is yes. If a theist who has comparatively analyzed the various competing sets of religious (and nonreligious) truth claims in an attempt to resolve the pluralistic challenge has not uncovered any compelling evidential basis for affirming hers, then I believe she is justified in resolving the conflict in her favor by an appeal to personal preference—a feeling (itself a basic, formed belief) that the set of basic religious truth claims she has found formed in her better organizes and explains the relevant components of reality than any other. Moreover, since she has met the relevant epistemic obligations by comparatively analyzing the competing sets of truth claims, I believe she is justified in claiming that her formed beliefs remain properly basic.

However, it is important in closing to distinguish once again between this model of ‘nonevidential’ religious belief justification and that proposed by Plantinga. Plantinga is a nonevidentialist in the sense that he thinks that we *need not* search for propositional evidence to support our formed beliefs or the reliability of our own belief-forming faculties. On the other hand, it is my contention

that, given the pluralistic challenge, the knowledgeable theist is required to look for such propositional evidence although she can justifiably continue to consider her formed beliefs properly basic even if none is found.

Moreover, I believe this distinction is important. If leading analytic philosophers of religion such as Plantinga were to use their considerable skills not only to defend religious beliefs but also to evaluate comparatively the 'content' of such beliefs, we could, I believe, begin to address seriously many of the theoretical and practical conflicts which differing religious perspectives generate.¹⁵

Roberts Wesleyan College

NOTES

1. Alvin Plantinga, "The Foundations of Theism: A Reply," *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (July, 1986): 307.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 300.

3. Alvin Plantinga, "On Taking Belief in God as Basic," Wheaton College Philosophy Conference (October 23-25, 1986), Lecture I handout, p. 1.

4. Plantinga, "Justification and Theism," *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (October, 1987): 405, 406.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 411.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 410.

7. Plantinga, "The Foundations of Theism," p. 313, n. 11.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 312.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Plantinga, *Justification and Theism*, p. 413.

11. To draw such analogies is not affected by the fact that we cannot consider our religious and other belief-forming faculties to be analogous in the context of GRA. In that context, the issue is whether all can be assumed to be equally reliable. The issue here is how we ought to respond to conflicts between formed beliefs, which can (and do) arise in relation to all our belief-forming faculties.

12. Since the phrase 'epistemic status' has various meanings, it is important to state explicitly that in those instances in which I inquire about the epistemic status of a theist's formed beliefs, I will be concerned with the question of whether she is within her rights in affirming the belief.

13. See, for example, David Basinger, "The Rationality of Belief in God: Some Clarification," *The New Scholasticism* 15 (Spring, 1986), pp. 163-85.

14. Plantinga, *ibid.*, p. 413.

15. I would like to thank William Alston and William Hasker for helpful comments made on earlier drafts of this paper.