

7-1-1994

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### Recommended Citation

Sudduth, Michael Czapkay (1994) "Bi-Level Evidentialism And Reformed Apologetics," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 3 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol11/iss3/2>

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# BI-LEVEL EVIDENTIALISM AND REFORMED APOLOGETICS

Michael L. Czapkay Sudduth

In this paper I apply William Alston's "epistemic level distinctions" to the debate between evidentialist and anti-evidentialist approaches to Christian apologetics in the Reformed tradition. I first clarify the nature of this debate by showing that it rests fundamentally on a tension between the desire to have a comprehensive Christian apologetic and the belief that the Holy Spirit plays a special epistemic role in belief-formation, such that certain beliefs are formed and justified by conditions unique to Christian religious experience. Secondly, I argue that even if S's belief that p is immediately justified (through such privileged modes of belief-formation), (1) an evidentialist requirement can be placed on the higher-level belief that P\* (p is immediately justified) and (2) apologetics can draw on the reasons which confer justification on P\*, thereby providing indirect support for p.

During the last ten years, a plethora of articles has been written on what is now called *Reformed epistemology*. A fairly large portion of these essays (and books) have involved explicating, examining, and elucidating the Reformed view on faith and reason within the context of contemporary epistemology. A somewhat neglected area, though, has been the application of developments in Reformed epistemology to the field of apologetics in the Reformed tradition, where both *evidentialist* and *anti-evidentialist* or *presuppositionalist* approaches to apologetics have been taken by Reformed thinkers in the 20th century. Although the debate between Reformed evidentialism and presuppositionalism includes the question of the propriety of the theistic arguments, it will be clear in this paper that the more fundamental issues involve the nature of apologetics and the epistemic function of the Holy Spirit in belief-formation. In the present paper I will draw upon William Alston's notion of "epistemic level distinctions" to clarify the nature of the Reformed apologetic debate and provide a plausible solution to the stalemate between evidentialism and presuppositionalism. My ultimate objective here is to employ Alston's multi-level foundationalism to construct an alternative apologetic system which subsumes the elements of positive value in both presuppositionalism and evidentialism while avoiding their respective errors.<sup>1</sup> I call this meta-apologetic theory, which combines immediately justified Christian beliefs with the evidentialist demand for adequate reasons, **Bi-Level Evidentialism**.



### I. Evidentialism and Evidentialist Apologetics

With Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, I take it that evidentialist apologetics began as a response to the evidentialist challenge to theistic belief which originated out of the Enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> This challenge may be stated in two propositions.

- (1) A person S is rational in believing that Pt (where Pt = the proposition *God exists*) only if S's belief that Pt is based upon adequate reasons.
- (2) There are no adequate reasons for the belief that Pt.

Although it is possible to construe something like (1) within a coherentist framework of rational belief, for the purpose of this paper I will take the evidentialist challenge to be rooted in *classical foundationalism*. Accordingly, although some beliefs are rational by virtue of their relation to other rational beliefs (by being *based upon* beliefs which provide adequate evidential support for them), these non-basic beliefs ultimately terminate (via a based-upon relation) in foundational beliefs (properly basic beliefs) which are rational even though they are not based upon some other (rational) belief(s). Moreover, a belief is properly basic if and only if it is either (a) self-evident, (b) immediately about one's experience, or (c) evident to the senses. So construed, the evidentialist challenge holds that since belief in God fulfills none of the criteria (a)-(c) for proper basicity, theistic belief is rational only if it can be adequately supported by some other rational beliefs, which terminate (proximately or remotely) in beliefs which are properly basic. But there are no such reasons that provide adequate support for theistic belief; therefore, theistic belief is irrational.

But what does it mean to have an irrational (or rational) belief? As has been pointed out by several writers, the concept of rationality is pluriform, and the matter is further complicated by a disagreement amongst epistemologists on the relationship between the concept of rationality and the closely related notions of "justification" and "warrant." There are two senses of rationality, though, which are important to distinguish. By "rational" one may mean "violates no intellectual duty." This *deontological* view is found in Alvin Plantinga's "Reason and Belief in God" (1983) where the evidentialist challenge is taken primarily in deontological terms, and it is argued (contra (1)) that one may believe in God without evidence and yet not be violating any intellectual duties.<sup>3</sup> However, there is widespread agreement amongst epistemologists that one may satisfy the conditions of deontological justification without satisfying other epistemic desiderata, such as truth or knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Now, on the one hand, this is not problematic, for it is an axiom (or nearly so) in epistemology that a justified belief may be false (and therefore not knowledge). But there is another sense of rationality which is stronger than deontological rationality with respect to the cognitive aim at truth. There

is what we can call *truth-conducive* rationality.<sup>5</sup> According to this concept of rationality, a rational belief is one that would put an individual in a *good position* vis-a-vis the cognitive aim at truth (where the deontological concept fails to satisfy this condition). The constraint of truth-conducivity requires that a person believe that *p* in such a way (or on such a basis) that it is at least very likely that *p* is true. In the long run, this would translate into the satisfaction of a more general epistemic desideratum: maximizing truth and minimizing falsity in our believings. Hence, although the evidentialist challenge may be construed in terms of deontological rationality, it may also be construed in terms of truth-conducive rationality. On the latter construal, the theist who believes in God without having or grounding that belief in adequate propositional evidence does not necessarily violate something like an intellectual duty, but is simply in a poor position with respect to the cognitive aim of truth.<sup>6</sup> In this paper, I will be speaking in terms of “justified” belief, where justification is truth-conducive (and the use of “rationality” should be taken as synonymous with, or as an up-shot of, truth-conducive justification).<sup>7</sup>

In response to the evidentialist challenge which maintained that there is no sufficient evidence for theistic belief, several philosophers and theologians have (contra (2)) sought to provide evidence for belief in God in order to establish it as a justified belief. This project of answering the Enlightenment challenge by adducing evidence for belief in God (where that evidence is presented in arguments which are either deductive or inductive in form) is **evidentialist apologetics**—the attempt to defend the faith by presenting positive arguments in favor of belief in God. However, if we view the development of evidentialist apologetics as a *response* to the Enlightenment challenge to theistic belief, then there are two different epistemic principles upon which evidentialist apologetics can proceed.

Evidentialist apologetics would follow from (1) if and only if (1) was conjoined with

- (3) S believes that there is adequate evidence for theistic belief.

An apologist, then, might accept the epistemological thesis of the Enlightenment that theistic belief is justified only if it is based upon adequate reasons, but also hold that there *is* sufficient evidence for theistic belief. Therefore, he would proceed on the assumption that belief in God without sufficient evidence is always irrational. We can call this **Strong Evidentialism** (hereafter, *E<sub>s</sub>*), since it maintains that adequate reasons are *necessary* for justified belief in God. *E<sub>s</sub>*-based apologetics accepts (1), but then, on the basis of (3), proceeds to argue that theistic belief *can* be supported by evidence, and that such evidence is sufficient and hence shows theistic belief to be rational. But a commitment to evidentialist apologetics need not involve an acceptance of (1). It could follow from (3) alone. An apologist might attempt

to supply theistic evidences simply because he believes that they do in fact exist (and are necessary for apologetics), not because he accepts the Enlightenment principle that theistic belief *requires* such evidence in order to be rational. So evidentialist apologetics can be based upon the epistemological thesis that evidence is a *sufficient* condition for rational belief. In other terms, an apologist might believe that belief in God can be rational (in some sense) without evidence, but nevertheless there is evidence for God's existence which should be adduced in apologetics. One may endorse and use theistic proofs or arguments in apologetics, but not hold that such evidences are necessary for a person to have a rational belief in God. We can call this version of evidentialism **Modest Evidentialism** (hereafter  $E_m$ ) and its apologetic application  $E_m$ -based apologetics.

## II. Reformed Apologetics

The history of Reformed theology has displayed a certain degree of ambivalence over the role of evidences in the justification of theistic belief. This ambivalence is most perspicuous in late 19th- and 20th-century Reformed apologetics,<sup>8</sup> where two schools of thought, **Reformed evidentialism** and **presuppositionalism**, have taken two quite distinct approaches to Christian apologetics. Presuppositionalism, based upon the work of the 19th-century Amsterdam theologian and philosopher Abraham Kuyper, has as its central characteristics the rejection of arguments for the existence of God and an emphasis upon taking belief in the God of Scripture as the starting point for every dimension of human life. Presuppositionalists (such as Herman Bavinck, Cornelius Van Til, and Gordon Clark) have argued that belief in both God and Scripture is an epistemically appropriate starting-point for the believer. Kuyper and Clark both press the point that every system of thought rests upon presuppositions, and every act of demonstration must terminate in first principles. Since ultimate premises are appropriately argued *from*, never *to*, there is no need to prove the existence of God or that Scripture is His Word. Moreover, since these beliefs are produced by the inward work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration, it is futile to adduce arguments for theistic or Christian belief in apologetics. Reformed evidentialists (such as Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, and B.B. Warfield), on the other hand, have generally not questioned the plausibility of taking theistic belief as a first principle, but they have questioned the inference from this that such principles should *never* be argued for. They have recognized that intuitive truths can also be discursively established, and that in apologetics one must reason back to theological first principles, not from them (as *is* appropriate in theology). Therefore, arguments for the existence of God and other Christian doctrines may be (and must be) used in apologetics.

As a starting point, I suggest that the debate between these two apologetic

schools be considered in the light of the epistemological distinction drawn above between  $E_s$  and  $E_m$ . Both presuppositionalism and Reformed evidentialism have at least one thing in common—both would deny (1). As Plantinga has argued, a basic principle of the Reformed tradition is the *proper basicity* or *immediate justification* of theistic belief (where a belief is justified by virtue of something other than some relation that belief has to some other justified beliefs). Hence the Reformed theologian would be committed in principle to rejecting deontological and truth-conducive versions of  $E_s$ . Both presuppositionalists and Reformed evidentialists agree that, insofar as the believer is concerned, theistic belief can be immediately justified.<sup>9</sup> The point at issue concerns the possibility of a *mediately* justified theistic belief and its place in apologetics, for if theistic belief can be mediately justified, then the reasons which confer such justification can be presented in apologetics.

If we concentrate solely on the Reformed tradition's commitment to the immediate justification of theistic belief (a theme heavily emphasized in the presuppositionalist's camp), it certainly seems that  $E_m$  is compatible with both Reformed evidentialism and presuppositionalism. If the Reformed position is committed to the *epistemological thesis* that belief in God can be justified for some person S without S basing that belief upon adequate reasons, it does not follow that there *are* no adequate reasons for such a belief, reasons which could be adduced in apologetics or which could even form a sufficient basis for a rational belief in God for someone. Put more technically, if S's belief in God can be immediately justified, why should this necessarily rule out the possibility of that very belief also being susceptible to a mediate justification? After all, one sufficient condition does not logically rule out the possibility of another.

One may take an analogy here from the belief "It is raining outside." One may form this belief on the basis of a particular sensory experience, say by just looking out the window. In such an instance the person would be appeared to rainily, and the belief that it is raining outside would be immediately justified on the grounds of sensory experience (assuming, of course, that the sensory experience can function as an adequate ground). Take another situation though. A person may be locked in a room without windows, but nevertheless has access to a certain body of auditory evidence. This person cannot see the rain falling down, nor can he run outside and feel the raindrops falling on his head. But he hears a series of rolls of thunder, a prolonged period of pitter-patter on the roof, and then someone walks in with a raincoat and umbrella soaked with water. We might add to this a certain set of background beliefs about what generally accompanies thunder and so on. The person concludes, based upon these evidences, that it is (or has just been) raining outside. The possibility that this was a cruel experiment conducted by an epistemologist (complete with sound effects and an actor with a raincoat just sprayed down

with a garden hose) notwithstanding, it is reasonable to see how one might conclude with a very high degree of probability that it is raining outside. The belief in question, then, can either be immediately justified on the grounds of sensory perceptual experience or mediately justified on the grounds of adequate reasons. Of course, such a justification would only be *prima facie*, since it would be subject to being overridden by sufficient reasons to the contrary. But until then, the belief in question is *prima facie* justified.

Similarly, theistic belief might be a candidate for immediate justification (e.g., by being based upon the grounds of religious experience) and also find sufficient conditions for justification in other justified beliefs. An apologetic method based upon a modest evidentialism of this sort would be *prima facie* compatible with Reformed theology since it allows for an immediately justified belief in God. But, since it equally allows for a mediately justified theistic belief, it would be able to make use of the reasons which produce such a justification. Hence, by adducing arguments which contain the relevant evidences, apologetics would be devoted to providing reasons *for* theistic belief, though this would in no way reflect the grounds upon which the Christian ought to believe. The only requirement would be that theistic belief be subject to both an immediate and *mediate* justification, and—as we have just seen—this is most plausible on epistemological grounds. Moreover, it is supported historically by the endorsement of theistic arguments by theologians in the Reformed tradition.<sup>10</sup> The Old School Calvinist William Shedd, though emphasizing the fact that belief in the existence of God is an intuitive first principle (and as such is given immediately to human consciousness), says that “certain syllogistic arguments have been constructed. . . [which] (1) assist the development of the idea of God, and contain a scientific analysis of man’s natural consciousness of the deity...[and] (2) reply to the counter-arguments of materialism and atheism.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Charles Hodge maintained that belief in God is among those “certain truths which the mind perceives to be true immediately, without proof or testimony,” but he was critical of those theologians and philosophers who inferred from this that the existence of God could not be proved. That there is “an extra-mundane and eternal being,” and that “he is a personal Being, self-conscious, intelligent, and moral. . . may lie inclosed in primary intuition, but it needs to be brought out and established.”<sup>12</sup> The Calvinistic Baptist Augustus Strong wrote: “Although the knowledge of God’s existence is intuitive, it may be explicated and confirmed by arguments drawn from the actual universe and from the abstract ideas of the human mind.”<sup>13</sup>

### III. *The Dilemma of Presuppositionalist Apologetics*

In the Reformed tradition, however, there seems to be a problem, and the problem arises in the presuppositionalist camp. The preceding conclusion

implies that belief in God can be formed on some basis other than the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit, that there are reasons (to which the unregenerate person has access) which entail (or render probable) the existence of God. Presuppositionalists, though, have argued that it is the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti* that enables the Christian to see immediately (without any reasons) the truth of God's existence and Scripture as a revelation from Him. Now admittedly this is complicated by a certain degree of vacillation among presuppositionalists as to whether it is the *belief* that God exists that is produced by the Spirit or whether it is the *certainty* that He exists which is produced by the Spirit. Calvin makes several statements to the effect that it is the "certainty which piety requires" and "firm faith in Scripture" which is produced by the Spirit and cannot be established by argumentation, and he suggests the same for belief in God.<sup>14</sup> Abraham Kuyper, the father of presuppositionalism, understood the act of faith to be "that function of the soul...by which it obtains certainty directly and immediately, without the aid of discursive demonstration."<sup>15</sup> Again, he speaks of faith in its "formal sense" as "a firm conviction," which "is not the outcome of observation or demonstration."<sup>16</sup> Herman Bavinck, after stating that we are deeply convinced of the external world, the self, and moral law without proofs or argumentation, and that belief in God is of a similar class, says, "The so-called proofs may convey greater clearness, [but] they are by no means the final grounds of our most certain conviction that God exists. This certainty is established only by faith."<sup>17</sup> But, if to believe that p is to take it that p is more probable than not-p (or some alternative q),<sup>18</sup> then "certainty" would not be a necessary component to "belief," and one should appropriately distinguish "belief that God exists" from "faith in God," where "faith" is taken to entail "certainty." Otherwise one is just confusing terms. And it does seem that there are many cases of religious belief which do not entail "certainty." The references above suggest that we should distinguish belief that God exists from a "certain" conviction that he exists. So perhaps the Spirit produces the element of "certainty" in religious belief. And even if one maintains that the Spirit produces both the belief and the certainty, this still leaves open the possibility that something else (reasons) can produce the belief, even if one is not certain about p. In this way, an argument which showed that God's existence was more probable than not might lead to belief, though not faith.

The theologian in the Kuyperian tradition might respond, "But after all it is not belief in the *true* God." And that will inevitably be the presuppositionalist's response. The saying of Pascal is well known: "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not of the philosophers and scholars." Calvin himself emphasized that, though the knowledge of God is innate, we lack "the natural ability to mount up unto the pure and clear knowledge of God"<sup>19</sup> and that "Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds. . . clearly

shows us the true God,"<sup>20</sup> not merely as the Creator but as the Redeemer. Similar sentiments can be found in the writings of Kuyper, Bavinck, Van Til, and Clark. I rather suspect, then, that the definition of God as "a person without a body who is eternal, is perfectly free, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and the creator of all things"<sup>21</sup> would not satisfy the presuppositionalist, since this definition expresses a fundamental conception of Deity common to Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. That there are strong arguments for the existence of a God defined in these terms, which might produce belief that such a God exists, would not impress the presuppositionalist. Although the Reformed theologian (including the presuppositionalist) would agree that a general theistic belief can be formed on some basis other than the inward work of the Spirit, he would also emphasize that belief in the God of Scripture (Christian theism in particular) requires special revelation, and belief in that revelation may not be possible without the illumination of the Spirit.

This has brought us to what is perhaps the crux of the problem in presuppositionalist apologetics—the *domain of the class of beliefs targeted in the apologetic task* and the *epistemic function of the Holy Spirit in belief formation* relative to these beliefs. Up to this point we have focused on *theistic belief* (Pt) as the domain of apologetics, rather than the broader category of *Christian belief* (Pc, where Pc entails Pt—though obviously not the converse). Presuppositionalists, though, have insisted that Christian apologetics must be concerned with more than the attempt to argue for a *minimal theism*. The apologetic task must be concerned with Pc-beliefs.<sup>22</sup> The central issues of the philosophy of religion have been questions concerning the nature of God, the meaningfulness of religious language, and the rationality of belief in God. Only recently has the philosophy of religion taken up questions relating to the more specific religious claims, but this is still very much uncharted territory.<sup>23</sup> In the philosophy of religion general religious claims and beliefs have been central, not the more specifically Christian claims. So, even if theistic belief could be formed on some basis other than the testimony of the Holy Spirit, we would still be left with the question as to whether belief in the several other central, and not so central, Christian doctrines could be so formed. I think that the Reformed theologian is committed to believing that among Pc-beliefs there are at least *some* Christian propositions belief in which requires the inner testimony of the Spirit.<sup>24</sup> Let us call this special subset of Pc-beliefs, *privileged epistemic state beliefs* (PES-beliefs) [Not to be confused with the notion of privileged access to one's own mental states]. PES-beliefs would be Pc-beliefs that require for their formation and justification epistemic conditions unique to the Christian. This could be cast in terms of belief formation on the grounds of a distinctly *Christian* religious experience and doxastic practice (as developed recently by William Alston in *Perceiving God*) or in terms of the proper functioning of special belief-

forming mechanisms (subject to the various additional Plantingian “warrant” constraints).<sup>25</sup> The essential point is that the justifiers of such beliefs would at least include grounds or epistemic conditions unique to the mental life of the person indwelt by the Holy Spirit.<sup>26</sup>

I would suggest that it is this conclusion that brings the project of Reformed apologetics to a serious impasse. Apologetics has as its objective *showing* that Christian beliefs or the Christian system of belief possesses some positive epistemic status. The concept of showing, though, clearly entails discursive or mediate justification. To show that *p* I must adduce other *beliefs* in support of *p*. These other beliefs must be justified and such that they constitute adequate reasons for *p*. Moreover, since showing is an audience-relative concept, the reasons must be acceptable to the audience. Now, if we restrict ourselves to theistic belief (as Reformed evidentialists have tended to do), the reasons are available. But what if we extend the set of beliefs targeted in apologetics to PES-beliefs, the formation of which require epistemic conditions to which only the Christian has access? And what if there is no good argument from *Pt* to PES-beliefs? This is like having an intuitive first principle which can only be seen intuitively by a certain class of people and which refuses (purely) discursive support in order to be shown to others. How, then, can the Reformed apologist defend the rationality of a class of beliefs which are formed on the basis of a Christian religious experience and subject only to an immediate justification? More generally, how can beliefs that is formed and justified by privileged modes (immediate or mediate) of belief formation be shown to possess an epistemic status which they have by virtue of conditions which (at least) include those privileged epistemic conditions? This is the dilemma of presuppositionalist apologetics.

#### IV. *Epistemic Level Distinctions and Bi-Level Evidentialism*

Faced with the above dilemma, presuppositionalists have turned to **negative apologetics**—answering objections made against Christianity. This has largely amounted to showing that such and such Christian belief is rational because coherent, or that some set of Christian doctrines is rational because self-consistent. After all, even if one cannot show that some set of propositions is true, one can show that they are self-consistent. Even if one cannot show that the Christian God exists, certainly one can show that it is a coherent belief. Unfortunately, a system may be entirely self-consistent, and yet possesses more false propositions than true ones, even all false propositions. Coherence is not a truth-conducive mode of justification. Taken by itself, it is a poor epistemological basis on which to launch a Christian apologetic. There is, however, another epistemological move that can be made along foundationalist lines, which would provide a solid basis for a form of **positive apologetics**.

The problem with presuppositionalism in apologetics is really a problem with an aspect of foundationalism in epistemology. Correctly recognizing that all mediate justification must terminate with beliefs which are immediately justified, presuppositionalists have argued that if that is where the justification stops, the epistemological buck stops there. To avoid an infinite regress of demonstrations, one must terminate justification in first principles or basic beliefs. Unfortunately, this fundamental reason for adopting foundationalism is also the major reason why some have avoided it. It seems to end up in arbitrary dogmatism, for—it is argued—the foundationalist is committed to accepting beliefs for no reason whatsoever. In fact, presuppositionalists in Reformed apologetics have often come across this way. They disavow any attempt to give reasons for their first principles, for the foundations. They seem to be committed to adopting beliefs in the absence of all evidence.

I believe that the way of escape here is to introduce the notion of “epistemic level distinctions,” a theme which figures prominently in the epistemology of William Alston.<sup>27</sup> Given any putative belief that *p*, we may distinguish between the belief that *p* and various higher-level doxastic correlates of *p*, the candidates for which would include *S*’s belief that: (a) *p* is a rational belief, (b) *p* is immediately justified, (c) *p* was formed in a reliable manner, or (d) *p* is based upon adequate grounds. Among other things, this allows us to distinguish between a belief that *p* and a higher-level belief about the epistemic status of *p* (call the higher level belief “the belief that **P\***”). This in turn makes possible the assessment of any belief (even an immediately justified belief) in terms of *reasons*, for where a belief that *p* is immediately justified, it is possible (in principle) to find reasons for the higher-level belief that *p* is immediately justified. So even if the belief that *p* is immediately justified, the belief that **P\*** (*p* is immediately justified) can be mediately justified. Therefore, if a lower-level belief that *p* can only be immediately justified, it does not follow that *p* cannot be assessed in terms of reasons. Even if one is restricted to immediate justification on the lower level for the belief that *p*, one may adduce reasons at the higher level for the belief that **P\***. We can call these reasons meta-reasons, since they are reasons for regarding the belief that *p* as immediately justified. These reasons would be something like *p* possesses some property *Q* and possessing *Q* renders *p* justified; that is to say, meta-reasons concern whether there is a valid epistemic principle and whether the belief in question (by virtue of possessing the appropriate justification-making property) falls under that principle. Hence, the absence of reasons at the lower-level can be compensated for by reasons which are adduced at the higher level. The belief that *p* is immediately justified, while the *correlative epistemic belief* of *p* (**P\***) is mediately justified.

In “Two Types of Foundationalism,” William Alston explains this level distinction in the following terms:

Though the simple foundationalist requires *some* immediately justified beliefs in order to terminate the regress of justification, his position permits him to recognize that all epistemic beliefs require mediate justification. Therefore, for any belief that one is immediately justified in believing, one *may* find adequate reasons for accepting the proposition that one is so justified. The curse (of dogmatism) is taken off immediate justification at the lower level, just by virtue of the fact that propositions at the higher level are acceptable only on the basis of reasons. A foundational belief, *b*, is immediately justified just because some valid epistemic principle lays down conditions for its being justified which do not include the believer having certain other justified beliefs. But the believer will be justified in believing *that* he is immediately justified in holding *b* only if he has *reasons* for regarding that principle as valid and regarding *b* as falling under that principle. And if he does have such reasons, he certainly cannot be accused of arbitrariness or dogmatism in accepting *b*.<sup>28</sup>

Hence, we may formulate the principle of **the higher-level evidentialist option**:

- (4) Given any person *S*, if *S*'s belief that *p* is immediately justified, then *S*'s belief that **Pt\*** (*p* is immediately justified) may be mediate justified.

Applied to our present inquiry two general consequences follow from this multi-level epistemology. The apparatus of epistemic level distinctions allows us to distinguish between the belief that *Pt* (*God exists*) and the belief that **Pt\*** (*Pt is justified*). Even if *S*'s belief that *Pt* is immediately justified, it is possible to ascend a level and raise the question regarding the epistemic status of the belief that *God exists*, to consider (reasons for) the higher-level proposition *S*'s belief that *Pt is immediately justified*. This move will become all the more important if we consider the problematic PES-beliefs discussed above. There we stipulated that PES-beliefs are beliefs formed under epistemic conditions unique to the Christian. Our primary targets were basic or immediate PES-beliefs (e.g., beliefs based upon Christian religious experience), the necessary justificatory conditions of which include (non-doxastic) grounds to which only the person indwelt by the Holy Spirit has cognitive access, the up-shot of which is that such PES-beliefs are subject only to an immediate justification. Clearly, though, if we distinguish between PES-beliefs and **PES\***-beliefs (i.e., beliefs about the epistemic status of PES-beliefs), then even if the justificatory conditions (whether immediate or mediate) of PES-beliefs are in some way privileged (such that only the Christian has access to them), the justificatory conditions of the higher-level epistemic correlates of PES-beliefs need not be privileged in that way. So even if a PES-belief is restricted to a form of justification which is privileged and immediate, the PES-belief can still be assessed in terms of reasons which are accessible to the non-Christian, for she may consider the reasons for the PES-belief's higher-level correlate **PES\***. Even where *S*'s PES-belief is solely immediately justified, the correlative higher-level belief that *S*'s PES-

*belief is (solely) immediately justified* may be *mediately* justified by being based upon accessible adequate reasons. And even where the target PES-belief is formed and justified by a privileged *mediate* mode of belief formation (such that the doxastic grounds for the PES-belief are only seen by the Christian) one can always raise the higher-level question and seek accessible reasons for the belief that *S's PES-belief is mediate justified*. Now I emphasize the accessibility element because the types of reasons or beliefs that are envisaged here as the grounds for **PES\***-beliefs are—as already pointed out—beliefs as to what principles of epistemic justification are valid and whether the target PES-belief can be validly subsumed under any of these principles. The formation and justification of such beliefs hardly seems a matter to be restricted to the cognitive life of the Christian.

Secondly, this distinction between various epistemic levels also allows us to incorporate a strong version of evidentialism. The distinction between epistemic levels entails that there are actually (at least) two distinct levels on which the evidentialist *requirement* for reasons may operate. There is a **lower-level evidentialist requirement** which requires for the justification of any putative belief that *p* that *p* be based upon adequate reasons, and there is a **higher-level evidentialist requirement** which requires adequate reasons for the justification of any higher-level correlate of a putative belief that *p*. Alston argues that if an epistemic belief is justified, it is mediate justified. Higher-level beliefs about the epistemic status of lower-level correlates are evaluative in nature, but all such evaluation involves supervenient properties, and the application of such properties will invariably be based upon more fundamental properties. If *S* is immediately justified in some belief that *p* this is because there *is* a valid epistemic principle which lays down conditions for the belief's being justified which do not include the possession of other beliefs. If *S* is to be justified in the belief that **P\*** (*S*'s belief that *p* is immediately justified), then *S* must have reasons for regarding such a principle *as* valid and for regarding *p* as appropriately falling under the principle. In other terms, *S* is justified in believing that *S*'s belief that *p* is immediately justified (if and) only if *S* is justified in believing that *p* possesses some property *Q* (a so-called "warrant increasing property") and that any belief that possesses *Q* is immediately justified.<sup>29</sup>

As I have argued, *E<sub>s</sub>* (strong evidentialism) is incompatible with Reformed theology since it rules out immediately justified theistic beliefs, and *E<sub>m</sub>* (modest evidentialism) is compatible with Reformed thought by virtue of leaving room for basic beliefs. However, now that we have introduced higher-level beliefs, we can modify our previous conclusion. All that was established earlier was that, since—for the Reformed theologian—theistic belief (and some *P<sub>c</sub>*-beliefs) are immediately justified, basing such beliefs upon adequate evidence cannot be a necessary condition for their justification. Conse-

quently,  $E_s$  was rejected with respect to lower-level beliefs. The situation is different at the higher level. Here we may maintain that higher-level beliefs *always* require adequate reasons for their justification. What we have found in the Reformed tradition is an emphasis upon immediately justified beliefs at the lower-level. From this follows only the rejection of lower-level  $E_s$ . This leaves open the possibility of advocating  $E_s$  on the higher level with respect to all epistemic beliefs.<sup>30</sup> We may, therefore, lay down the principle of **the higher-level evidentialist requirement**:

- (5) Given any belief that  $p$ ,  $p$ 's correlative higher-level epistemic belief that  $P^*$  is justified *only if*  $P^*$  is based upon adequate reasons.<sup>31</sup>

The preceding epistemology, then, gives us the following statement on the justification of Christian beliefs, what I call **Bi-Level Evidentialism** (which conjoins both *lower-level*  $E_m$  and *higher-level*  $E_s$ ).<sup>32</sup>

- (6) Given any person  $S$ , if  $S$ 's belief that  $P_c$  (where  $P_c$  = any Christian belief) is either (a) immediately justified, (b) mediately justified, or (c) both [(a) and (b)], and if  $p$  is either (a) or (b) then the correlative epistemic belief that  $P_c^*$  is justified *only if*  $P_c^*$  is based upon adequate reasons.

The foregoing epistemology of religious belief allows for a far richer framework for Christian apologetics than has been previously taken up by Reformed apologists, and one which goes considerable distance toward overcoming the stalemate between the Reformed evidentialists and presuppositionalists. It follows from the argument of the previous section that the activity of justifying Christian belief(s) can take place on any one of many epistemic levels. The dominant tradition in Christian apologetics has been what we might call **lower-level positive apologetics**—the attempt to justify various religious beliefs and/or theological propositions (which are nonepistemic) by an appeal to other nonepistemic beliefs. I will call this the *L-justifying* of beliefs (“L” referring to the “lower-level” from which the support is drawn). Alternatively, Bi-Level Evidentialism opens up the prospects for **higher-level positive apologetics**. Here some putative Christian belief that  $P_c$  is supported by the activity of justifying the correlative higher-level belief that  $P_c^*$ , what we can call the method of *H-justifying*. So, for example, where  $S$ 's belief that  $P_c$  is immediately justified, one may adduce the appropriate reasons for regarding (the higher-level proposition)  $P_c$  as *immediately justified* as justified. This method extends the scope of apologetics to cover a wide range of Christian beliefs which hitherto could not (or at least not readily) be assessed in terms of reasons.

The relevance of H-justifying to apologetics is determined by the *apologetic relevance* of meta-reasons, and apologetic relevance is conditioned by “epistemic” and/or “alethic” relevance, for the apologist is engaged in the

two-fold objective of trying to establish the *rationality* and *truth* of Christian belief(s). Higher-level beliefs that are about the epistemic status of their lower-level correlates are *directly* epistemically relevant and hence provide a kind of *direct* support for the belief's epistemic status. But if the epistemic status is truth-conducive (as our concept of justification has been), then a belief's epistemic status is *indirectly* relevant to its alethic status, and therefore establishing the former provides *indirect* support for the latter. In other terms, although we begin by targeting an epistemic belief by considering *reasons for Pt\** (or, more broadly, any Christian belief **Pc\***), this procedure ends up providing *reasons for Pt* (or *Pc*).<sup>33</sup> In this way we can call H-justifying a mode of *indirect* support for Pt (or Pc), for the activity of justifying the lower-level belief that Pt (or Pc) is *mediated* by the activity of justifying the higher-level belief that **Pt\*** (or **Pc\***).<sup>34</sup>

### V. Conclusion

At the beginning of the paper we saw that the belief that there is adequate evidence for the existence of God is sufficient for launching the project of evidentialist apologetic (whether or not one also buys into the evidentialist principle that the rationality of theistic belief requires propositional support). Reasons may be essential to *justifying* theistic belief (via apologetics), even if not necessary for a person's being epistemically justified in believing in God. What evidentialist apologetics depends upon, of course, is the possibility of a mediate justification of the target belief and the ability to adduce those reasons. In the light of this, I suggested that the difficulty in Reformed apologetics was not fundamentally a disagreement about the possibility of a mediately justified theistic belief (as this is quite compatible with an immediately justified theistic belief), but rather the dilemma of Reformed apologetics is generated by (1) the desire to have a more comprehensive Christian apologetic and (2) the belief that the Holy Spirit has a special epistemic function in the production of certain Christian beliefs, leading to *privileged epistemic state* beliefs.

Drawing upon William Alston's multi-level foundationalism I have argued two points. First an epistemological claim: even where a putative belief that Pc is immediately justified, it is possible (in principle) to find reasons for regarding the belief *as* immediately justified. Moreover, an evidentialist requirement for being justified in all such higher-level beliefs would be compatible with the immediate justification of beliefs at the lower level. Secondly, I applied this bi-level scheme to Reformed apologetics, specifically to the debate between evidentialist and presuppositionalist schools. The higher-level evidentialist option makes possible a more comprehensive Christian apologetic, for we may adduce reasons for Pc by justifying Pc's higher-level epistemic correlate **Pc\***, a most important move where the target beliefs

are PES-beliefs, beliefs formed on the grounds of religious experience or some other privileged epistemic condition(s). Bi-Level Evidentialism allows the Reformed thinker to enter into the task of “giving a reason for the hope that is within him,” even when that hope is a product of, what John Calvin called, the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti*.<sup>35</sup>

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## NOTES

1. I regard my paper as a further development of and contribution to the discussions on evidentialism found in George Mavrodes, “Jerusalem and Athens Revisited” in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Wolterstorff, “The Migration of the Theistic Arguments: From Natural Theology to Evidentialist Apologetics” and Kenneth Konyndyk, “Faith and Evidentialism” in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986); Stephen J. Wykstra, “Toward a Sensible Evidentialism: On the Notion of Needing Evidence,” in *Philosophy of Religion; Selected Readings*, 2nd ed., ed. William Rowe and William Wainwright (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989); and most recently John Zeis, “Natural Theology: Reformed?” in *Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology*, ed. Linda Zagzebski (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

2. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, “The Migration of Theistic Arguments” in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, ed. Audi and Wainwright, and Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God” in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Plantinga and Wolterstorff.

3. Plantinga identifies this sense of rationality with justification and distinguishes justification from another sense of rationality as warrant, where the latter is that quality or quantity—enough of which—is sufficient (or nearly so) to transform true belief into knowledge. See Plantinga, *Warrant: the Current Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

4. See William Alston, “The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification” in Alston, *Epistemic Justification* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 145-151. Here Alston argues that the deontological view of justification lays down neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for justified belief.

5. For an explication of truth-conducive justification, see Alston, “Concepts of Epistemic Justification” and “The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification” in Alston, *Epistemic Justification*, pp. 83-84, 143-52.

6. In fact, recent versions of the evidentialist challenge have been critical of deontological rationality. Keith Parsons, for instance, after pointing out the disparity between the deontological and truth-conducive conceptions, says, “It follows that the claim that the theist is within his epistemic rights in believing in God is a rather weak claim, and, in my view, is not terribly interesting philosophically” (“Is There a Case for Christian Theism” in *Does God Exist?: The Great Debate*, ed. J. P. Moreland and Kai Nielsen (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), pp. 177-78).

7. For the only exception to this, see endnote no. 31.

8. For discussions on this debate, see Robert Raymond, *The Justification of Knowledge* (New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1979) and Alan P. F. Sell, *The Philosophy of Religion 1875-1980* (London: Croom Helm, 1988). For a critique of presuppositionalism (specifically Cornelius Van Til's presuppositionalism), see R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), chapters 10-20.

9. In this paper I will not enter into the question of how it is that theistic belief could be immediately justified. Theistic belief could be based upon the grounds of religious experience (such as developed by Alston in *Perceiving God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991)), or alternatively it could be the product of a properly functioning belief forming mechanism, subject to whatever additional constraints are necessary along the lines of Plantinga's recent warrant thesis (See Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993)). Since I am assuming a truth-conducive view of justification, there would have to be a reliability constraint, though this could be spelled out in different ways—reliable process, reliable indication, a wholly externalist theory, or a mix of internalism and externalism.

10. I will purposely avoid reference to John Calvin at this point. Although I believe one can find (at least implicit) support for a mediate natural knowledge of God in Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (see my "The Prospects for 'Mediate' Natural Theology in John Calvin," forthcoming in *Religious Studies*), the explicit endorsement of theistic arguments (and a natural theology based on them) does not enter into Reformed theology until the development of Protestant Scholasticism under the likes of Girolamo Zanchi (1516-90), Theodore Beza (1519-1605), and Lambert Daneau (1530-95). Consequently, theologians such as Jonathan Edwards, William Shedd, Charles and A. A. Hodge, Robert L. Dabney, and B. B. Warfield must be viewed as representative of a long-standing tradition in Reformed theology with respect to their endorsement of theistic arguments.

11. William Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (n.d.; reprint, Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1980), pp. 221-22.

12. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 192, 202.

13. Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology* (1907; reprint, Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1979), p. 71.

14. See Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), I, vii, 4 and 5.

15. Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, tr. J. Hendrik DeVries (1898; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), p. 129.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

17. Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, tr. William Hendriksen (1951; reprint, Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), pp. 78-79.

18. See Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 3-8.

19. Calvin, *Institutes*, I, v, 15.

20. *Ibid.*, I, i, 1.

21. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 8.

22. I do not mean to suggest that Reformed evidentialists have not been interested in an apologetic which targets Pc-beliefs. But whereas Reformed evidentialists have buttressed such a Christian apologetic by historical evidences and natural theology (so-called *minimal theism*), presuppositionalists have questioned both the adequacy and propriety of such a method, in part for the reasons mentioned in the remaining portion of the present paragraph (in the text).

23. Richard Swinburne, for instance, takes up the question of the grounds for believing the claim that some particular book or creed contains revealed truth in *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). In "Could there Be More than One God" in *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 5 (July 1988): pp. 225-41, Swinburne argues from natural theology to the probability of God existing as a trinity of persons.

24. One such class of beliefs might be those with self-referential indicators, such as in the proposition "Jesus Christ is *my* Lord and Savior" or "God is speaking to *me*" (when reading Scripture). Others, such as Gordon Clark (and possibly John Calvin), maintain that the belief that Scripture is the Word of God can only be produced by the illumination of the Spirit.

25. As a technical qualification, though I am focusing on *immediate* modes of belief formation, the same line of reasoning could hold for *mediate* modes of belief formation. It could be that some PES-beliefs are formed on the basis of reasons and are mediately justified. Here "privileged epistemic states" includes privileged *doxastic* grounds for belief. In fact this will generally be the case if beliefs based upon privileged immediate modes of belief formation form the (necessary) grounds for other beliefs in a Christian's noetic structure.

26. Throughout this paper I am assuming a *source-relevant* conception of epistemic justification, according to which the origin or psychological source of a belief is crucial to its being truth-conducively justified.

27. See Alston, "Two Types of Foundationalism," "What's Wrong with Immediate Knowledge," and "Level Confusions in Epistemology" in Alston, *Epistemic Justification*.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

29. This is by no means an uncontroversial thesis, but space constraints prohibit a defense. For a discussion on why epistemic beliefs cannot be immediately justified, see Alston, "Two Types of Foundationalism" in *Epistemic Justification*, pp. 23-32.

30. I believe that this sheds light on several of John Calvin's comments, which seem to suggest an ambivalence regarding the role of evidences vis-a-vis Christian belief. Although he speaks of belief in Scripture as the Word of God not being based upon reasons or arguments, he also speaks positively about Scripture being reliable and so on and presents arguments to this end. The latter proposition, though, is what I have been calling a higher-level proposition, so it is no contradiction to allow rational belief without evidence on the lower level but also maintain rational beliefs on the higher-level require (or at least have) evidence.

31. Note here that **P\*** must be "based upon adequate reasons," but we need not think that the support mode requires a conscious inference of some sort. We must allow that

grounds (reasons) for mediate justification can be possessed implicitly—though *justifying P\** would, of course, involve a justificatory argument exhibiting the inferential relations between *P\** and its supporting reasons in an explicit fashion. That would be the situation in apologetics.

32. In another paper, “Alstonian Foundationalism and Higher-Level Theistic Evidentialism” (forthcoming in the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*), I devote my attention wholly to the complex *epistemological* thesis envisaged here. There I argue: (1) Alston’s multi-level foundationalism is compatible with Reformed epistemology (even in its strongest form), and (2) the form of evidentialism entailed by Alston’s epistemology satisfies the cognitive desiderata which have inspired traditional evidentialism—internalism and reflective rationality, and therefore (3) Reformed epistemology is compatible with a strong form of evidentialism.

33. As a technical point, the sense in which *Pt\** is a reason for *Pt*, or the sense in which justifying *Pt\** provides a justification for *Pt*, is not truth-conducive. Justifying *Pt\**, though, does give us reasons for *regarding Pt* as truth-conducively justified. The rationale for deviating from truth-conducive justification at this point stems from the nature of apologetics. In apologetics some arguments can be useful even if they do not render their conclusions more probable than not, for it is possible to conjoin such arguments with others in the attempt to present a cumulative case which does bring a particular conclusion to the level of rational acceptability, to the level of being more probable than not. Higher-level positive apologetics, properly construed and effectively employed, will be part of a cumulative case apologetic.

34. Although in higher-level apologetics the justifying of the nonepistemic belief that *Pt* is mediated by the justifying of the epistemic belief that *Pt\**, the justifying of *Pt\** will, in turn, depend upon the justifying of *nonepistemic* beliefs  $b_1, \dots, b_n$ , for what the justification of *Pt\** depends upon are beliefs as to *what in fact is the case* (whether *Pt* possesses some property *Q*) and beliefs as to *what principles of evaluation are valid* (whether possessing *Q* actually confers justification on *Pt*), not beliefs about some person’s epistemic relation to these elements. Accordingly, (1) the belief that *Pt\** (*Pt* is immediately justified) is adduced as a reason for (2) the belief that *Pt*. But something like the belief that (A) *Pt* possesses a property *Q* and (B) *possessing Q* renders *Pt* justified are reasons for *Pt\**. In this way, epistemic beliefs rest on nonepistemic foundations. See Alston, “Two Types of Foundationalism” in Alston, *Epistemic Justification*, p. 29.

35. I would like to thank Richard Swinburne, William Alston, Alister McGrath, Sarah Coakley, and Philip Quinn for commenting on earlier drafts of this paper. Their critique and comment proved essential to substantial improvements on the paper.