

1-1-1989

## Evidentialism: A Theologian's Response

Gordon Kaufman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Kaufman, Gordon (1989) "Evidentialism: A Theologian's Response," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol6/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

# “EVIDENTIALISM”: A THEOLOGIAN’S RESPONSE

Gordon D. Kaufman

Current discussions of “evidentialism” seem to presuppose essentially traditional theistic conceptions and formulations. For many theologians, however, these have become problematic because of (a) the rise of a new consciousness of the significance of religious pluralism; (b) the emergence of theories about the ways in which our symbolic frames of orientation shape all our experiencing and thinking; (c) a growing awareness that significant responsibility for some of the major evils of the twentieth century must be laid to our religious traditions. Since recent discussion of “evidentialism” continues to employ traditional symbols and concepts without sensitivity to these matters, it has not attracted much interest among contemporary theologians.

In recent years direct conversation between philosophers and theologians has been somewhat muted. Many theologians have been suspicious of the critical and skeptical spirit of much modern philosophy, and have not felt that their work required extensive study of and sophistication in contemporary philosophy; many philosophers, for their part, if they concerned themselves with theological issues at all, have done so more in terms defined by the great figures out of the past, instead of informing themselves about, and engaging themselves with, major questions which contemporary theologians find central.<sup>1</sup> In consequence, although lively and important discussions are going on both among contemporary theologians and contemporary philosophers of religion, there seems to be, unfortunately, less direct dialogue between these groups than one might hope for. Doubtless each group can give reasons why they find the discussions going on in the other less than helpful. I will leave it to the philosophers to speak for themselves on this question; but I would like to take this opportunity, as a theologian, to suggest some reasons why the current philosophical discussions of “evidentialism” may not capture much interest among many contemporary theologians—however important they are in their own right, and however much they help to show, as Robert Audi and William Wainwright have put it, that the “field of philosophy of religion is probably more vital today than at any other time in this century.”<sup>2</sup> In my remarks here, of course, I am speaking only for myself, not for contemporary theology generally or even for some particular group of contemporary theologians; but I don’t believe that what I intend to say is completely idiosyncratic.



## I.

The discussions of “evidentialism” which I have read, though manifesting much technical virtuosity and bringing to bear important insights and subtleties developed in recent philosophical reflection, seem to be largely a contemporary extension of issues having a long history in western religious reflection. They do not, however, appear to reflect much attention to an issue to which contemporary theologians have increasingly felt they must address themselves, namely, the problematic character of certain basic presuppositions of this tradition itself. Since, thus, these discussions continue to take for granted assumptions which are today in question for a good many theologians, it should not be surprising if they do not have a large impact on contemporary theological discussions. Let me try to explain.

Evidentialism of a sort—what I will call a “soft” or “weak” evidentialism—has been a principal mark of Christian and Jewish faiths from their very beginning; and it has characterized these faiths throughout their long histories. According to most historians the faith of Israel (the acknowledged parent of both Judaism and Christianity) was born in connection with the escape of some slaves from Egypt under the leadership of Moses: Moses taught these escaping slaves that it was the God Yahweh who had made possible their departure from Egypt. They decided, therefore, to make a covenant with this God, binding themselves and their descendants to him—I use the masculine pronoun advisedly—and promising to keep his commandments. Thus, from the very beginning of Israel’s special relationship to Yahweh, certain experiences—the occurrence of certain events interpreted in a particular way—provided grounds for faith: this was a faith that was based (at least in part) on what were taken to be *evidences* of Yahweh’s activity and of his special concern for and care of Israel.

The further growth and development of this faith (as reflected in Old Testament writings and eventually in the New Testament) occurred also in connection with historical events and experiences, and the interpretation of these as expressing God’s dealings with the Hebrew people (and later on, with Gentile Christians as well). The understanding of this historical and experiential relationship was often relatively crude. For example, the circle of historical writers who put together the book of Deuteronomy presented a fairly simplistic reward-and-punishment interpretation of history: events promoting Israel’s well-being—victory in warfare, the breaking of droughts, the healing of diseases—were seen as direct evidence of God’s intervention in human history in behalf of Israel; in contrast, the occurrence of catastrophic events—defeat in war, famine, crop failures, and the like—were evidences of God’s judgment on, and quite proper punishment of, the people of Israel for failing to keep the covenant. Many of the prophets, also, spoke in these relatively straightforward “evidentialist” terms.

Stories in which God is reported to have intervened in human affairs in miracles are not infrequent in these writings: as signs to Gideon, for example, God wet with dew a fleece which Gideon left out on the ground one night, and the next night God kept the fleece dry though the ground all around it was wet (Judges 6:36-40); in a contest between Elijah and the prophets of Ba'al, God sent down fire from heaven, at Elijah's request, to ignite a sacrifice which earlier had been thoroughly soaked with water (1 Kings 18:30-40); and so on.

As might be expected with this sort of "evidentialist" understanding of Israel's relationship to God, when the political and military destruction of the two Israelite kingdoms occurred, with many of the people carried off into exile, a severe crisis in the people's faith erupted. Many were persuaded that Yahweh was either not as well disposed toward Israel as had been believed, or was not as powerful as had been supposed. The catastrophe here was more than the simplistic historical reward-and-punishment conception of the Deuteronomists and others could bear. If faith in Yahweh was to survive, a more satisfactory interpretation of massive human suffering—always a severe problem for theistic worldviews—had to be found. This was the occasion, thus, for the appearance of the notion of "vicarious suffering" which would bring about the salvation of others, as set out in the "servant songs" of Second Isaiah (42:1-4; 49:5-7; 53; etc.). The problem of the inequitable distribution of goods and evils in history was not really resolved, however, especially on the level of the individual believer, as one can see clearly in the powerful protests against God found in Job, Ecclesiastes and many of the Psalms. It was, of course, because Israel's faith was so largely grounded on the presupposition that there are clear *evidences* in human experience and history of God's activity and nature, that issues of this sort were so difficult to handle. The so-called problem of evil has, thus, been with us for a very long time: it is an inevitable corollary of a faith that presumptuously supposes it knows more about God and God's activity than human finitude permits. I will return to this point later. This dialectical tension between traditional faith in God and the human experience of evil has also, of course, been a central issue in the modern evidentialist debates.

In the New Testament a quasi-evidentialist religious orientation is continued. Jesus is presented as a wonder-worker, and the healings and other miracles which he performs are seen as evidences of his divine mission. The most critical event for Jesus' followers was his crucifixion, which directly contradicted the disciples' expectations, thus giving rise to hard questions about whether Jesus' mission was really from God. The rise of the Christian church out of the ashes of pessimism and despair, however, with the triumphant claim that Jesus had "risen from the dead," brought about a remarkable christological creativity which culminated finally in the belief that Jesus had ascended into heaven to "sit at the right hand" of God the Father Almighty. All of these developments, it is to be

noted, were grounded on appeals to supposedly historical and experiential data, taken to be evidence for the Christian understanding both of who Christ was and of what God was doing in and through him.

Western religious traditions, thus, both Jewish and Christian, are deeply grounded in a quasi-evidentialist approach to religious understanding, and it should occasion no surprise, therefore, that the problems of evidentialism continually reappear in the religious reflection carried on within these traditions. Jewish and Christian reflection on the Nazi holocaust presents an obvious contemporary example of this, but there are many other problems today—e.g., those raised by contemporary biological and medical knowledge, or by the development of nuclear weaponry—which also pose severe difficulties for theistic faith.<sup>3</sup>

In the course of the development of modern philosophy a new concentration on the question of what might properly be counted as genuine evidence for religious belief appeared. The rise of modern science seemed to many philosophers to show that knowledge of near certainty is attainable by humans, but only under carefully specified conditions (which were, of course, always under debate). In particular, the kinds and qualities of evidence for cognitive claims which experience could supply were thoroughly investigated, and (as a result of the work of Hume and Kant and others) the possibility of making warrantable metaphysical and theological claims on the basis of experiential evidence came to seem increasingly dubious. During this period many traditional religious beliefs, particularly those connected with the reality and nature of God, were subjected to tests contrived to meet the demands of a new “strong” or “hard” evidentialism, tests that went, in the stringency of their requirements, far beyond anything heretofore seen in western religious reflection. This modern evidentialism, Nicholas Wolterstorff suggests, is characterized by a double thesis: “(a) if one is rationally to believe some theistic proposition, one must believe it on the basis of others of one’s beliefs that constitute good evidence for it; and (b) one is overall justified in believing some theistic proposition only if it is rational for one to believe it.”<sup>4</sup> On this view an evidentialist challenge could properly be addressed to anyone holding theistic beliefs; an evidentialist defense might then be presented if someone attempted to meet this challenge by providing the appropriate arguments. The current discussion of “evidentialism,” so far as I can see, is essentially a continuation of these debates running through the modern period. It has now, however, become considerably refined, in the light of recent critiques of the modern quest for cognitive certainty and of the “foundationalism” which this spawned and nurtured. This discussion is quite illuminating within its own limits, but it begs issues which have become urgent for many contemporary theologians. Instead of exploring it further, therefore, I want now to attempt to explain why (in my opinion) this whole long evidentialist religious tradition,

going all the way back to the biblical origins of Christian and Jewish faiths, now confronts questions which demand a rather different approach.

## II.

Evidentialist arguments are addressed to specific beliefs held by adherents of a particular religious tradition: does the evidence favor belief A or does it, for the most part, weigh against it? (In the recent discussions this issue has been refocused into an inquiry whether the demand for “evidence” with respect to religious belief is rationally appropriate or justified.) In these arguments, therefore, the issues taken up are those suggested by explicit claims made within the tradition; the tradition provides both the specific claims and the particular terminology on which the debates focus. In this respect the questions considered in the evidentialist debates are *internal* to the tradition (though they may be posed, of course, from quite alien standpoints): attention remains focused on this or that particular concept or belief found within the tradition itself. Wider questions, about the nature of traditions or worldviews themselves and how these function in human experience and thinking, do not ordinarily come up for direct consideration in these discussions; these may, in fact, be regarded as “sociological” or “historical” matters, which are not pertinent to the strictly “philosophical” inquiry into the “truth-claims” being made within the tradition. However, for those who believe that religious concepts, questions and claims are not “free-standing,” but are in significant ways a function of the overarching religious worldviews or traditions (or “ways of life”) within which they appear, philosophical priority must be given to questions about the status, function, and even “validity” of these overarching symbolical frameworks or worldviews themselves; and issues strictly internal to a long-standing historical tradition may thus become of secondary interest. As Wolterstorff has put it, “issues of rationality are always situation specific.”<sup>5</sup> Since the intellectual situation in which many theologians now find themselves has changed significantly in recent years, it should not surprise us if “those abstract and highly general theses of evidentialism no longer look very interesting.”<sup>6</sup>

What I would like to do now is sketch briefly the shift in interest and attention that has occurred for many contemporary theologians. A number of factors seem to be involved in this: I will mention three interconnected ones here. First, let us take note of the rise of a new consciousness of the significance of religious pluralism. There has always been, of course, awareness of the plurality of religious traditions and claims. Indeed, the Old Testament can be read as essentially a record of the struggle between rival religious traditions, each well aware of the others: the story of Elijah and the prophets of Ba’al (referred to above) provides an obvious example. Similarly, the rise of Christianity is portrayed in the New Testament as in tension with Judaism on the one side, and the many

Hellenistic cults on the other. All of these stories are told with polemical intent, and this has been continued through most of subsequent Christian history: the fundamental truth of the basic Christian claims was taken for granted, as was the untruth, even the diabolical nature, of the claims of the church's opponents. Recently, however, among many Christian theologians (as well as others) there has been a striking change with regard to these matters. Instead of continuing the traditional attempts to make definitive normative claims about "Christian truth" or "the Christian revelation," many now see the plurality among religious traditions, as well as the enormous pluralism within the Christian tradition, as themselves of profound human meaning and importance: what seems required now, therefore, rather than polemical pronouncements, is careful and appreciative study, together with an attitude of openness to what can be learned from this great diversity of ways of understanding the world, and the human place within the world.<sup>7</sup> When this kind of attitude appears, the diverse ways in which different religious traditions provide orientation and meaning for human life becomes a central point of interest, and it becomes important to re-examine Christian claims about "truth" and about "divine revelation" in light of these new issues, and in relation to corresponding understandings and claims in other traditions. It now seems apparent to many theologians that such central Christian symbols as "God" and "Christ" are much more complex than appears on the surface; and before one can understand all that is really going on in them, it is necessary to learn a good bit more about how religious symbols and traditions in general function. It is expected that comparison with other symbols and practices—for example, those of Buddhists or Jews (or Marxists)—will illuminate dimensions of Christian faith and life and symbols which have remained hidden to direct *internalist* approaches to theological questions.<sup>8</sup>

A second important development lying behind the shift in consciousness of many contemporary theologians (closely related to the first) is the emergence of new theories about the ways in which cultural and linguistic symbolic or conceptual frames shape all our experiencing and thinking. Theories about worldviews, about the holistic character of cultural and religious systems, about the role of historically relative "paradigms" (to use Thomas Kuhn's word) in shaping scientific and other thinking, about the respects in which thought is bound up with language, etc., and theories about the place and significance of religious symbols and symbol-systems in all of this, are becoming increasingly influential among theologians.<sup>9</sup> These sorts of theory (taken together with the new sympathetic consciousness of religious pluralism) have given rise in theologians to a new self-consciousness about the extraordinarily complex and problematic character of all so-called "religious truth-claims," including those made by Christian faith. Such claims, it now becomes apparent, are always in fact articulated in highly symbolical language—language with many levels of meaning, language the pri-

mary function of which is not so much to articulate “truths” about the world and the human (as we in our scientific age might be inclined to think about these matters) as it is to present a framework from within which basic orientation and meaning for the whole of human life can be found. Given this understanding of religious language and ideas, it does not seem appropriate to move directly to questions about, for example, the “evidences” which can (or cannot) be brought forward for certain (usually quite traditional) beliefs about God. Before that question can be addressed, such issues as the following must be taken up: How and why did human beings construct this symbol “God” in the first place? What range of functions has it performed and what patterns of meaning has it been associated with, in its long history. What consequences for human life have followed from its employment? We cannot take it for granted that this symbol has always meant essentially the same thing; nor can we assume that the meaning it carried in earlier periods of history (whether biblical, or the high Middle Ages, or the Reformation) is the meaning which it should (or can) carry for us today.<sup>10</sup> Before we can intelligently talk about “evidences” with respect to beliefs about God, we must resolve for ourselves a number of important prior issues: How should God be conceived today? What sorts of considerations bear on this issue, and why? What alternative proposals are available to us? What criteria for assessing these can be brought forward? And so on. It is not possible responsibly to discuss questions about “evidences” respecting *God*—i.e., the *reality*, and not simply what is all too easily assumed to be “*the traditional notion*” of God—without first addressing in some detail these questions about what we are seeking evidences for. Careful exploration of these issues discloses a whole nest of enormously complex problems.

The third development driving contemporary theologians into major reassessments of traditional assumptions about the Christian tradition is closely interconnected with the two I have just mentioned, and it may to some extent underlie and motivate them. It is our unexpected confrontation with utterly appalling evil in the twentieth century—two horrible world wars, the Nazi holocaust and other instances of genocide, the ecological crisis, the use of atomic bombs in World War II and the ever-present possibility of nuclear obliteration of the human race, and so on. The problem of evil, as I noted above, has always posed serious difficulties for theistic belief, and it is very much an issue in the evidentialism debates; it should come as no surprise, therefore, that the massive evils of the twentieth century have raised once again the old problems about the sovereignty and goodness of God. But now a new element has been added to these ancient issues, driving them to a deeper level: it now seems that Christian faith, Christian ways of understanding the world and the human place within the world, a powerful Christian sense of divine authorization and thus superiority over other religions, Christian imperialism, Christian racism and sexism, and other charac-

teristics and qualities of the Christian religion and of “Christian civilization,” bear some significant responsibility for most of the evils I have just mentioned. Christian theologians today have thus been driven, in a way unprecedented historically, to ask some hard questions about Christian faith, practices and institutions, questions that force close examination of the very symbols and ideas that have traditionally informed this faith and these practices: What has gone wrong here? How could Christian practices, attitudes and ideas have led to these horrors? In what ways have the central Christian symbols—the image/concepts of *God* and of *Christ* (as these have been received and understood)—themselves somehow contributed to this? With profoundly disturbing questions of this sort about the actual impact of Christianity on human affairs, it is not surprising that theologians (along with many others) have begun to turn with new interest to see what other religious (and humanistic) traditions have to offer; and have inquired with new intensity into the ways—often obscure and devious—in which Christian symbols, practices and institutions have actually functioned in human life. Learning from Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, radical feminists, and others, they have begun to apply what Paul Ricoeur has called a “hermeneutics of suspicion” to their own traditions; and this has made it clear that it is no longer theologically responsible to adopt uncritically an accepting attitude toward traditional beliefs or ideas. Radical reconstruction of central concepts and symbols of the Christian faith—including “God” and “Christ”—now seems to many to be required; to continue to inquire into “evidences” which bear on this or that detail of traditional beliefs seems to be fiddling while all of Rome is afire.

### III.

I cannot here outline my own approach to these difficult problems of theological deconstruction and reconstruction; I have discussed various aspects of them in detail elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> I would like to conclude my remarks, however, by sketching briefly my understanding of the sort of setting within which many theologians today work, as they take up questions having to do with primary religious symbols such as “God.” All three of the points I have just made—the new consciousness of the significance of religious pluralism, the growing awareness of the way in which all our ideas are shaped by the cultural and symbolic framework of orientation within which we are living and thinking, the sensitivity to Christian responsibility for certain aspects of the massive evils which confront us today—tend to promote a deep humility about the religious and philosophical traditions we have inherited and a profound questioning of the propriety of making dogmatic claims of any sort with regard to their ultimate “reality” or “truth.” There is a growing consciousness that is to say, that at its deepest level life confronts us finally as Mystery, and that this awareness has often been softened, and sometimes

significantly obscured, by our religious symbolisms, which seem to offer us answers to our most difficult questions.<sup>12</sup> Today we are forced to take with greater seriousness the fact that we do not know, and we can see no way in which we will ever be able to plumb, the true meaning of human life—or whether there even is such a thing. We have many important questions about ourselves and our world to which we cannot find definitive answers: Are some forms or modes of life more “authentically” human than others, and how could one decide this? What is a truly “good” life, and how would one possibly know? Are there some identifiable central problems, or malformations, or diseases of human existence or the human spirit (sin) for which lasting solutions or cures (salvation) are available? Are some religious or philosophical or moral or scientific traditions of more value than others in addressing such matters, or are all in various ways both helpful and misleading, leaving us in a problematic relativism? Should the world, and human life within it, be understood most fundamentally with reference to “God”? to “material energies”? to “*Brahman*”? to “Life”? to “*Sunyata* (emptiness)”? Or should we try to banish all such questions from our minds and live out our existence, so far as possible, simply in terms of the day to day problems that confront us? This inscrutable Mystery—or these many mysteries—provides the ultimate context of our existence. From the earliest period of self-conscious human life, as far as we can see, men and women have grappled with this situation, and in the various great systems of religious symbolism and ritual, which they have created in consequence, they have found such partial answers as they could. None of these pictures or conceptions or stories of the world, however—these frames of orientation—fits all dimensions of experience perfectly, and in consequence there have always been persons like Job and Ecclesiastes, Camus and Sartre, who have cried out against the unintelligibility of what they were living through.

In western religious traditions this ultimate mystery of and behind human existence is usually identified as God; and in affirmations that God is “infinite” or “absolute,” “transcendent” or “ineffable,” believers have reminded themselves that this One whom they worship is to be understood ultimately as mystery. This, however, is a highly dialectical point, and it is important that we see its implications for our understanding of how we talk about God and what we can say about God. On the one hand, the image/concept “God” seems intended to symbolize that—whatever it might be—which brings true human fulfillment; that is, in speaking of “God” we seek to attend to the mystery in its aspect as source and ground of our being and our well-being, as that on which, therefore, we can rely absolutely. But on the other hand, as the ultimate mystery, God is beyond our knowledge and understanding. This implies and requires an acknowledgment of our *unknowing* with respect to God, an acknowledgment (that is to say) that we do not know how the images and metaphors in terms of which we

conceive God apply, since they are always our own metaphors and images, infected with our limitations, interests, and biases. (For just this reason we dare not claim that they have been directly revealed by God.) Only in and with such acknowledgment does the symbol “God” turn us—by indirection—toward the ultimate source and context of our humanity.

The difficult dialectic to which I am here attempting to point is not merely of intellectual interest: it is an expression of something which has always been regarded as central to religious piety, namely repentance. Repentance is certainly a human act (or attitude), but it has the peculiar dialectical character of being an act of self-renouncing, an act of giving up our own claims. This self-renouncing must include, I want to emphasize now, our claims to certainty of knowledge. If we try to overcome and control the mystery within which we live—for example, through philosophical or theological ideas in which we take ourselves to be in a position to present conclusive evidences and arguments, or through religious rituals or practices which promise us a secure place in the ultimate scheme of things—we sin against God, as we try to make ourselves the ultimate disposers of our lives and destiny. We must, then, repent: we must turn around from this posture, which we all too often take up with respect to the ultimate mystery of life, and move toward a recognition that our destiny is ultimately in *God's* hands not ours; that is, that it remains mystery to us.

With this emphasis on our faith in and dependence on what is ultimately *mystery* I do not mean to suggest that there is no place for careful and sustained theological and philosophical reflection on our religious symbols and practices. Only in and through such reflection, perhaps, are we enabled to perceive the dialectic in the concept of God to which we are attempting here to attend, a dialectic which must inevitably involve a certain agnosticism. Not a cynical agnosticism, of course, that is destructive of everything humans believe in and need, but that agnosticism which indirectly opens us to what is beyond our present world, opens us to that which we do not yet know but which will be creative of our future. Faith is the “letting go” (as Kierkegaard put it) of all attachments, including specifically and especially our religious and theological attachments; it is just these idolatries which shield us from—and thus close us off from—that ultimate mystery in which both our being and our fulfillment are grounded.

There is a sphere which we humans can (and should) largely control, and our philosophical and theological work takes place within that sphere. But just this recognition raises indirectly the question about that which we do *not* control, that which we do not and cannot understand, analyze, explore, prove—the ultimate mystery, a mystery which we may (in faith) choose to call “God.” In my view—as a Christian theologian aware how deeply disturbing are the questions which religious pluralism raises for Christian conceptions of humanity and reality,

and conscious of the extent to which all of our thinking and arguing is a function of the symbolic and conceptual frames within which it occurs, and persuaded of the Christian culpability for much evil in the world—the debates focusing on “evidences” for this or that particular detail in traditional beliefs about God are simply failing to notice or take account of the depths of this mystery within which we humans live. In consequence—unhappily—they often trivialize the very ideas and beliefs which they are seeking to explore and understand. Questions of this sort must always be approached with a profound awareness of their ultimate gravity, difficulty, and obscurity, and with a sensitivity to the ultimacy of that mystery to which faith, with its talk of *God*, is seeking to respond.

Philosophical reflection is indispensable for theology; and theological reflection may have some important insights to offer philosophers. It is one of my deepest hopes, therefore, that conversation between their tribes will increase, as each makes whatever contribution it can to the ongoing human task of discovering how to live—and perhaps even to flourish!—in our very difficult world.

*Harvard University, The Divinity School*

## NOTES

1. An important exception to this generalization is Joseph Runzo, who has carefully explored contemporary theological reflection on the problem of “relativism” (see *Reason, Relativism and God* [New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986]).

2. See *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 9.

3. In my little book, *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press and Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1985), I have discussed some of the theological issues which the nuclear crisis poses.

4. “The Migration of the Theistic Arguments: From Natural Theology to Evidentialist Apologetics,” in Audi and Wainwright, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-39, n. 2. (See also “Can Belief in God Be Rational if it has no Foundations?” in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983], pp. 135-86). In my opinion Wolterstorff is correct in his claim that the modern “evidentialist” debates about the grounding of faith are of a stringency, and perhaps a motivation, unknown in earlier periods. His article goes on to suggest, however, that this appearance of what I call “hard evidentialism” was a kind of aberration, rather than a quite natural and proper development (in a new epistemological situation), of the long-standing weaker evidentialism of the tradition; and that today—now that we see its limitations, largely derived from the dubious “foundationalist” assumptions characteristic of much modern epistemology—the problems for faith and theology to which it gave rise are dissolved. This conclusion seems to me misleading. As I am trying to show in this paper, the problems connected with the basic evidentialism of western religious traditions go considerably deeper than even the “hard evidentialists” have supposed. Since

it is precisely these deeper issues that are increasingly occupying the attention of many contemporary theologians, the current philosophical interest in a new version of the evidentialist debates may seem a little beside the point.

5. "Can Belief in God Be Rational . . ." *op. cit.*, p. 176.

6. *Ibid.* These words of Wolterstorff, though used by him to refer to the significance of a somewhat different situational shift than I am concerned with here, very aptly express my point.

7. A striking example of this changing attitude among theologians can be seen in the essays collected in the new volume, ed. by John Hick and Paul Knitter, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1987).

8. At one point Robert Audi begins to touch on the issues raised by a plurality of religious standpoints, but his discussion is very brief, and he does not seem to see that the points he raises may in fact call into question the premises of the entire evidentialism discussion. (See "Direct Justification and Theistic Belief," in Audi and Wainwright, *op. cit.*, pp. 163-65.

9. There is an enormous, very diverse, literature involved here; I can mention only a few items which have been particularly influential among contemporary theologians: Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), and P. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday, 1966); Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (London: Cresset Press, 1970); Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), and *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), esp. chs. 1-5; Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), and *Interpretation Theory* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976); Max Weber, *Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963). Writings of this sort—taken together with the many historical studies of biblical materials and of Christian history, which show the enormous diversity of perspectives within this history and the apparent relativity of each to the historical situation in which it emerged—have had a powerful impact on many theologians' attitudes toward the symbols and concepts of the Christian tradition.

10. Most of the contemporary discussions of "evidentialism" seem blissfully unaware of these problems. Along with Richard Swinburne, many philosophers of religion seem to suppose that the term "God" refers quite unproblematically to "a being with one or more of the following properties: being a person without a body (i.e., a spirit), present everywhere, the creator and sustainer of the universe, a free agent, able to do everything (i.e., omnipotent), knowing all things, perfectly good, holy, and worthy of worship" (*The Coherence of Theism* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977], p. 2).

11. See especially, *An Essay on Theological Method* (Decatur, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1975; rev. ed. 1979), esp. chs. 2, 3; *The Theological Imagination* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), esp. chs. 1, 3, 7, 9, 10; and *Theology for a Nuclear Age*, chs. 2, 3.

12. In much of what follows I have borrowed freely (without indicating specific quotations) from my article, "Mystery, Critical Consciousness, and Faith" (published in the *Festschrift* for Basil Mitchell, *The Rationality of Religious Belief*, ed. by W. J. Abraham and S. W. Holtzer [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987], pp. 53-69).