Alvin Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology:
Analysis and Critique
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Introduction

Should the expression "religious knowledge" be framed in ironic quotation marks, and rightly considered oxymoronic, something akin to the expression "military intelligence"?[1] Is the adjective "religious" juxtaposed with the noun "knowledge" an inherent contradiction, an antiquarian notion, the epistemological pipedream of a bygone, pre-modern era that is simply no longer possible in the age of the Bultmannian "wireless" or more appropriately, in an epoch of quarks, quasars, computers, and information superhighways? On the assumptions of Enlightenment epistemology—specifically classical foundationalism and positive science—the answer should probably be affirmative: the notion of "religious knowledge" is non-sequitur, or a *bona fide* "no-brainer" as we say today.

As knowledge, religion does not qualify and is thusly denied entrance into the epistemic kingdom. It can be no more than subjective preference, taste, opinion, value, or feeling. Hence, to acknowledge trans-empirical realities, to embrace the metaphysical, or to be seriously religious means nothing less than the *sacrificium intellegentia* on the *Aufklarüng* altar of scientific rationality. In other words, the canons of modern thought rule out the religious *a priori*, and any leap of faith is *ipso facto* deemed irrational and fideistic.[2]

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[1] This idea of the oxymoronic nature of the phrase "religious knowledge" is from C. Stephen Evans and Merold Westphal, editors. *Christian Perspectives on Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), p. 1.

[2] In surveying the characteristics of the modern world view, Richard Tarnas contends that science replaced religion as the preeminent cultural authority, and notes that, in the process, religion lost any genuine cognitive status, and was relegated to the realm of the subjective, the affective, or the poetic. He eloquently describes this state of affairs thusly. "Human reason and empirical observation replaced theological doctrine and scriptural revelation as the principal means for comprehending the universe. The

However, many are increasingly cognizant of the fact that such dwarfing of the epistemological domain through the confining assumptions of modernity not only suffocates the human spirit, but also places severe and perhaps unnecessary restrictions on other knowledge enterprises, including science itself.[3] Consequently, there has been much recent activity dedicated to a careful reconsideration of the very concept of rationality, or at least the parsimonious Enlightenment version of it, in a manner which

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domains of religion and metaphysics became gradually compartmentalized, regarded as personal, subjective, speculative, and fundamentally distinct from public objective knowledge of the empirical world. Faith and reason were now definitely severed. Conceptions involving a transcendent reality were increasingly regarded as beyond the competence of human knowledge; as useful palliatives for man's emotional nature; as aesthetically satisfying imaginative creations; as potentially valuable heuristic assumptions; as necessary bulwarks for morality or social cohesion; as political-economic propaganda; as psychologically motivated projections; as life-impoverishing illusions; as superstitious, irrelevant, or meaningless. See his *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View* (New York: Harmony Books, 1991), p. 286.

[3] Richard Swinburne in recounting his own intellectual and spiritual journey made this appropriate observation. "My study of science showed me one thing very quickly and very obviously. The great theories and predictions of modern science concerned matters far beyond observations: atoms and electrons and now quarks, far too small to be observed in any literal sense; and galaxies and quasars and the 'big bang,' far too distant in space and time to be observed in any literal sense. If we insist that to be meaningful a theory has to be 'verifiable' in the sense of conclusively verifiable by observation, modern science would be rendered meaningless. Yet since it quite obviously isn't meaningless—as everyone in any way touched by the modern worldview would have to admit—theories could be meaningful without, in that sense, being verifiable. I saw . . . that the verificationist dogma was fatally flawed. What makes scientific theories *meaningful* is not their verifiability but the fact that they describe their entities ('atoms') and their properties ('velocity,' 'spin') with words used somewhat similar to words used for describing ordinary mundane things. . . . And scientific theories (or hypotheses) were *justified* insofar as (1) they lead us to expect the phenomena we observe around us, (2) the phenomena would otherwise be unexpected, and (3) they are simple theories. See his "The Vocation of a Natural Theologian," in Kelly James Clark, ed., *Philosophers Who Believe: The Spiritual Journeys of 11 Leading Thinkers* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), pp. 183-84. This critique of the verifiability principle and of positive science in general, of course, is now common and is articulated by many others, for example C. Stephen Evans, *Philosophy of Religion: Thinking about Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1982), pp. 143-44.

delivers it from possible indigence and which is far less stingy in its application. One part of this re-evaluation process is the quest for a fresh understanding of the rationality of religious belief (or "knowledge"), especially in Anglo-American philosophy of religion. As Linda Zagzebski points out, for some, this new interest is merely an *ad hoc* reaction to contemporary religious skepticism, but she believes, and I think rightly so, that "it is, in fact, part of a widespread desire to re-examine the nature of rationality—a desire found among philosophers in such diverse fields as moral and political philosophy, philosophy of science, and philosophy of mind, and arising from scholars who have been influenced primarily by continental Europe as well as from those who have been analytically trained."[4]

At the center of this renaissance of interest in religious ways of knowing is "re-formed epistemology," so-called because of its connection with Calvinist and reformed theology, and the recognized leader of this contingency is the noted philosopher from Notre Dame, Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga, who has delivered the prestigious Gifford (1987) and Wilde lectures (1988), and who has served as president of the American Philosophical Association and the Society of Christian Philosophers, is best known for a variety of astonishing epistemic claims. These include that belief in God can be properly basic and rational without evidence or support by any argument, that natural theology is unnecessary for the epistemic credibility of religion, and that Christian philosophers can and ought to take certain Christian doctrines as assumptions in their philosophical research. In this paper, my goal is to lay out the contours of Plantinga's argument for proper basicality that includes the divine, to offer a religio-theological response, and to suggest that as an implicit critique of modernity, it deserves consideration in an

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[4] Linda Zagzebski, editor. *Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), p. 1.

emerging postmodern age characterized by greater rational freedom and religious interest.

The Contours of Plantinga's Argument for God as a Properly Basic Belief[5]

Plantinga sets out to discuss these questions: "Is belief in God rational?" "Is it rational, or reasonable, or rationally acceptable, to believe in God?" Or more precisely, "whether it is rational to believe that God exists—that there is such a person as God." He opines that perhaps the central question of philosophy of religion is "the question whether religious belief in general and belief in God in particular is rationally acceptable" (454-55). After presenting the difficulty of establishing criteria for what it is for any belief to be rational, Plantinga points out that most natural theologians and natural atheologians (as he calls them) "concur in holding that belief in God is rational only if there is, on balance, a preponderance of evidence for it—or less radically, only if there is not, on balance a preponderance of evidence against it" (455). As an example of this outlook, Plantinga cites the dictums of the nineteenth century philosopher W. K. Clifford who stridently argues that the believer in God must have substantive evidence if he or she is not to be irrational. As Clifford summarizes, "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" (456). And for Clifford, since

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[5] Plantinga has laid out his viewpoint in a variety of publications the most notable of which are the following: "Is Belief in God Rational?" in *Rationality and Religious Belief*, ed. C. F. Delaney (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979); "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality*, eds. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" *Nous* 15 (1981); "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," *Christian Scholars Review* 11 (1982). This last installment can be found in *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, 1980. This survey is taken from a conflation of the first two installments cited here and conveniently found in Louis P. Pojman, *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1987), pp.454ff. Pages numbers cited in the text in parentheses are from Pojman.

those who believe in God do so on the basis of insufficient evidence (and are therefore immoral in their belief), they are viewed as pests at best or menaces to society at worst.

Plantinga, however, points out that there are problems for the Cliffordian position, namely that it does not specify what in fact constitutes evidence, and even if criteria for evidence were specified (which, similar to rationality, is difficult to do), it remains unclear how much would be sufficient to justify a belief, especially belief in God. Plantinga also recognizes that Clifford's position is rooted in a foundationalist theory of knowledge and thus entails the claim

> . . . that we must evaluate the rationality of belief in God by examining its relationship to *other* propositions. We are directed to estimate its rationality by determining whether we have *evidence* for it—whether we know, or at any rate rationally believe, some other propositions which stand in the appropriate relation to the proposition in question. And belief in God is rational, or reasonable, or rationally acceptable, on this view, only if there are other propositions with respect to which it is thus evident (456).[6]

According to Plantinga, this is the view of classical foundationalism which constitutes "a picture or total way of looking at faith, knowledge, justified belief, rationality, and allied topics" (457). In spelling out this viewpoint, he says,

> according to the foundationalist some propositions are properly basic and some are not; those that are not are rationally accepted only on the basis of *evidence*, where the evidence must trace back, ultimately, to what is properly basic. The existence of God, furthermore, is not among the propositions that are properly basic; hence, a person is rational in accepting theistic belief only if he has evidence for it (Ibid.).

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[6] More abstractly, using the letter *E* to symbolize foundational principles, Plantinga says (456): "According to the Cliffordian position, then, there is a set of propositions *E* such that my belief in God is rational if and only if it is evident with respect to *E* —if and only if *E* constitutes, on balance, evidence for it." He then asks: "But what propositions are to be found it *E* ? Do we know that belief in God is not itself in *E* ? If it is, of course, then it is certainly evident with respect to *E*. How does a proposition get into *E* anyway? How do we decide which propositions are the ones such that my belief in God is rational if and only if it is evident with respect to them?"

Classical foundationalism, which is a normative thesis about how beliefs ought to be structured and about what constitutes rationality, is designed to protect belief systems from error by allowing only absolutely certain propositions to make up the foundation, and thereby permitting only those propositions that are rightly related to the foundation to count for knowledge.[7] God is certainly not a part of the foundation as a properly basic belief, nor, according to many, is belief in Him even admitted as a non-basic belief on the basis of the foundation. This is exactly the thesis that Plantinga seeks to challenge and he does so in the following manner.

He begins by laying down the conditions of proper basicality which all versions of foundationalism are concerned to establish. His survey of ancient, medieval, and modern foundationalism (Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Clifford and others) leads him to conclude that three types of propositions qualify for proper basicality. First, a proposition is properly basic if it is *self-evident* which is to say that "one simply sees it to be true upon grasping or understanding it. Understanding a self-evident truth is sufficient for apprehending its truth" (459).[8]

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[7] Robert Audi in his book *Belief, Justification and Knowledge* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1988), p. 99, has distinguished between modest and strong foundationalism the latter which, he says, in one form, is "deductivist, *takes foundational beliefs as indefeasibly justified*, and allows coherence only a minimal role" (emphasis added). In Audi's typology, Plantinga has described a "strong" version of foundationalism, especially since it allows for only "absolutely certain propositions to make up the foundation."

[8] Here are Plantinga's examples of self-evident propositions (459): 2 + 1 = 3; No man is both married and unmarried; For any proposition p the conjunction of p with its denial is false; Redness is distinct from greeness; The property of being prime is distinct from the property of being composite; The proposition all men are mortals is distinct from the proposition all mortals are men; If p is necessarily true and p entails q, then q is necessarily true; If e1 occurs before e2, and e2 occurs before e3, then e1 occurs before e3; It is wrong to cause unnecessary and unwanted pain just for the fun of it.

He further elaborates on the nature of self-evident truths by noting that this notion must be relativized to persons, for what is self-evident to one might not be to another. Self-evident truths may also contain an *epistemic component*, namely "that proposition

The second kind of proposition that may constitute the foundation of knowledge are truths that are *evident to the senses*, that is those "perceptual propositions . . . whose truth or falsehood we can determine by looking or [by] employing some other [empirical] sense" (460). Plantinga suggests that propositions such as: "there is a tree before me"; "I am wearing green shoes"; "that tree's leaves are yellow" are good examples of truths that are evident to the senses (Ibid).

Other foundationalists, like Descartes, argue that properly basic beliefs in a rational noetic structure must possess *certainty* in some important sense. Thus, properly basic beliefs would exclude such propositions that are allegedly evident to the senses for they may be subject to illusion and/or hallucination. Instead they substitute the more cautious claims about the state of one's own inner, mental or conscious life which seem to be immune from error. Statements such as "It seems to me that I see a tree," or "I seem to see something green," or "I am appeared greenly to," could be described as *incorrigible* which Plantinga defines in this manner: that "*p* is incorrigible for *S* if and only if (a) it is not possible that *S* believe *p* and *p* be false, and (b) it is not possible that *S* believe ~p and *p* be true" (461).

When put together, ancient, medieval, and modern foundationalists would agree that a proposition is properly basic if and only if it is either self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible. Foundationalism constitutes what Plantinga calls a "rational noetic structure" which means, among other things, that no belief may be accepted that is not a part of and/or does not rest on this foundation, else one fail to do the right thing with respect to one's believings and violate one's epistemic duties (458).

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p is self-evident to a person *S* only if *S* has immediate knowledge of *p*—that is, knows *p*, and does not know *p* on the basis of his knowledge of other propositions" (460). They may also contain a *phenomenological component* or what Locke called an "evident luster," or what Descartes referred to as a "clarity and distinctness," a luminous obviousness that seems to compel or impel assent.

At this point, Plantinga returns to his main question: "Why should not belief in God be among the foundations of one's noetic structure?" (Ibid.) From the perspective of classical foundationalism, the answer is that even if belief in God is true, it does not have the characteristics that a proposition must possess in order to have a place in the foundation. That is, belief in God is neither self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible. Hence, belief in God is not properly basic. But Plantinga is neither satisfied with the criteria of classical foundationalism nor with this elimination of the divine as properly basic.

Regarding this thesis he asks: "Is there any reason to accept it? Why does the foundationalist accept it? Why does he think the theist ought to?" (ibid.). Furthermore he levels these two criticisms against the supposition. First, if it is true and if its correlative premise is true that a proposition is rationally acceptable only if it follows from or is probable with respect to what is properly basic, "then enormous quantities of what we all in fact believe are irrational" (ibid.). He notes that one lesson learned in the development of modern philosophy from Descartes to Hume is that "relative to propositions that are self-evident and incorrigible, most of the beliefs that form the stock in trade of ordinary everyday life are not probable—at any rate there is no reason to think they are probable" (ibid.). In other words, the foundationalist principle as formulated excludes from the realm of the rational a number of obviously rational propositions such as that there are enduring physical objects, that there are persons distinct from myself, and that he world has existed for more than five minutes, or that I had lunch this afternoon. Like the positivists' principle of verifiability, the foundationalist principle seems to over argue its case and thereby excludes too much—things that are *prima facie* rational and accepted by almost everyone.

The second critique places the classical foundationalist between Scylla and Charybdis. The Scylla is that the classical foundationalist, to support the thesis, must provide some kind of supporting argument for the principle of classical foundationalism

that is either self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible—something of a meta-foundational principle for classical foundationalism. But on Plantinga's reckoning, this has never been and probably cannot be done. "It therefore appears," he says, "that the foundationalist does not know of any support for [it] from propositions that are (on his account) properly basic" (462).

The Charybdis is that if the principle is simply *accepted* as basic, which is the only other alternative (other than declaring the principle itself to be false), then it must itself be either self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible for the one who so accepts it. But as Plantinga points out, the principle is self-refuting, for it "meets none of these conditions" (462). And if that is indeed the case, then it is not properly basic for the person who embraces it, and that same person is self-referentially inconsistent in accepting it: he accepts it as basic despite the fact that it does not meet the conditions for proper basicality. If one should embrace it nevertheless, that person has violated his or her "epistemic responsibilities," for the ethics of belief proscribe believing in a proposition that is known to be false or is of such a nature that one ought not to believe it. And finally he argues that no one should urge and no one should accept any objection to theistic belief that depends upon this proposition which itself ought not to be believed. Plantinga concludes his case by saying "It is evident . . . that classical foundationalism is bankrupt, and insofar as the evidentialist objection [to theism] is rooted in classical foundationalism, it is poorly rooted indeed" (462).

The evidentialist objection to theism does not, of course, have to build its case on *classical* foundationalism, for as Plantinga says, "quite a different version of foundationalism could no doubt urge this objection" (Ibid.). Once an alternative version is formulated, then its criterion of proper basicality would have to be evaluated to see if it succeeds any better than the first alternative. But at this point, no such alternative is available, and consequently, the evidentialist's objection to theism really is at best a "promissory note" (Ibid.). The next move is up to the evidentialist to specify a criterion

for proper basicality that is free from self-referential difficulties, rules out belief in God as properly basic, and is credible in itself.[9]

But it is Plantinga who takes up the challenge and makes the next move, and in doing so, draws on the Reformed tradition. Why is it, he asks, have a number of Christians in the Reformed tradition been at best tolerant, and at worst, highly critical, if not condemnatory, of the project of natural theology to offer reasons and evidence designed to prove the existence of God? In answering this question, he considers central ideas of three representative reformed thinkers including the nineteenth century Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck, John Calvin himself, and the neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth.

From Bavinck comes the themes that a distinct natural theology apart from revelation does not exist, that Scripture itself does not reason in the abstract ("God is not at the conclusion of a syllogism"), that arguments or proofs are not the source of the believer's confidence and knowledge of God, and that there is not a single object the existence of which we hesitate to accept until proofs are furnished including things such as the self, the world, logical and moral laws, and, analogously, God. In Plantinga's estimation, the upshot of Bavinck's thought is that "the believer does not need natural theology in order to achieve rationality or epistemic propriety in believing; his belief in God can be perfectly rational even if he knows of no cogent argument, deductive or inductive, for the existence of God—indeed, even if there is no such argument" (464).

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[9] Presumably, another option for the evidentialist objector to theism might be to give up on foundationalism entirely, and opt for a coherentist model of belief, justification, and knowledge. By means of negative epistemic dependence, the defeasibility of theism might be shown by virtue of its incoherence with other beliefs that one holds or that are culturally accepted as justified. On the other hand, the theist might also consider all forms of foundationalism bankrupt, and opt for the coherence model to justify theistic belief. For an example of the latter alternative, see Dirk-M Grube, "Religious Experience After the Demise of Foundationalism." An unpublished paper read at the American Academy of Religion in Washington, D. C., November 21, 1993.

Why this is the case becomes clear in Plantinga's treatment of the sixteenth-century reformer, John Calvin.

According to Calvin, God has implanted in everyone, everywhere an innate tendency, disposition or "nisus" to believe in him. The reformer called this idea the "*divinitatis sensum*," or the "*semen religionis*," respectively the "sense of divinity" and the "seed of religion." Plantinga quotes from Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (I. III. 1.) to establish this outlook, and the following excerpts are sufficient to convey the thrust of Calvin's thesis here.

> There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. . . . God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. Ever renewing its memory, he repeatedly sheds fresh drops. . . . Yet there is, as the eminent pagan [Cicero] says, no nation so barbarous, no people so savage, that they have not a deep-seated conviction that there is a God. So deeply does the common conception occupy the minds of all, so tenaciously does it inhere in the hearts of all! Therefore, since from the beginning of the world there has been no region, no city, in short, no household, that could do without religion, there lies in this a tacit confession of a sense of divinity inscribed in the hearts of all (464).

Furthermore, according to Calvin, God not only "sowed in men's minds that seed of religion . . . but revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe" (Ibid.). Awareness of God is thus available not only inwardly, but also by means of the manifestations of him in and through the created order. And finally, when it comes to rational and evidential arguments for God's existence, Calvin said there is a higher, better, and more stable approach. "If we desire to provide in the best way for our consciences—that they may not be perpetually beset by the instability of doubt or vacillation, and that they may not also boggle at the smallest quibbles—we ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgments, or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Holy Spirit" (464; *Institutes* I. VII).

At this point, though he does not develop his position in detail, Plantinga adds the name of Karl Barth to this roster of reformed thinkers as one who not only rejects the project of natural theology (*Nein*!) but as one who embraces some kind of notion of the natural knowledge of God as the foundation for proper epistemic activity.

For Plantinga, this kind of thinking not only explains why reformed Christians have spurned the project of natural theology (the *divinitatis sensum* and *semen religionis* simply make it unnecessary), but it also provides the bottom line for his own epistemic alternative. As he puts it, Bavinck, Calvin, and Barth. . .

> all hold that belief in God is *properly basic*—that is, such that it is rational to accept it without accepting it on the basis of any other proposition or beliefs at all. . . . What the Reformers held was that a believer is entirely rational, entirely within his epistemic rights, in starting with belief in God, in accepting it as basic, and in taking it as premise for argument to other conclusions (465).

In other words, these three reformed thinkers should be understood as rejecting, albeit anachronistically, classical foundationalism. While they may have been inclined to hold that in every rational noetic structure there is a set of beliefs taken as basic, and while they would seem to show no objection to the idea that in a rational noetic structure non-basic belief is proportional to support from the foundation, at the same time they would *in no way accept* that the foundation of a rational noetic structure could only include propositions that are self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible. Contrariwise, they were prepared to argue that a rational, noetic structure can and ought to include God as basic and foundational.

But there is one serious difficulty which this alternative raises, and Plantinga states it thusly: "If belief in God is properly basic, why cannot *just any* belief be properly basic? . . . will we not be committed to holding that just anything, or nearly anything, can properly be taken as basic, thus throwing wide the gates to irrationalism and superstition?" (466). This is the now famous "Great Pumpkin" objection. He asks: "What about the belief that the Great Pumpkin returns every Halloween? Could I properly take

that as basic?" (466). Here, of course, the real question and issue is: "How do we rightly arrive at or develop criteria for meaningfulness, or justified belief, or proper basicality?" (467) such that not just anything will qualify as meaningful, justified, or basic?

Plantinga responds in at least three ways. First of all, he reminds us that just as the breakdown of the revised version of the verifiability principle did not give us license to accept as meaningful a sentence such as "T' was brillig; and the slithy toves did gyre and gymble in the wabe," so likewise the breakdown of classical foundationalism does not mean that just anything is basic. The loss of classical foundationalism would no more justify belief in the "Great Pumpkin" than the loss of the verifiability principle would justify accepting Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" sentence as meaningful.

Second, Plantinga also suggests that beliefs are properly basic only in certain circumstances and conditions that "ground and justify belief in God" (468). For example, the belief that one sees a tree when one is out of doors in the forest is circumstantially appropriate whereas it is not when one is sitting in the living room listening to music with eyes closed. Thus, there are "many conditions and circumstances that call forth belief in God [as properly basic]: guilt, gratitude, danger, a sense of God's presence, a sense that he speaks, perception of various parts of the universe." While these conditions or circumstances are not to be construed as reasons for belief in some sort of deductive manner, they are conditions, grounds, or circumstances that persuade people that belief in God is properly basic and rational.[10]

Finally, Plantinga argues that if criteria are to be presented which will determine which beliefs are properly basic, then "the proper way to arrive at such a criterion is, broadly speaking, inductive" (468). He adds that "accordingly, criteria for proper basi-

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10 William J. Abraham believes that "this is a tantalizing suggestion. As it stands, it dwells in that twilight zone between the psychology of belief (what triggers our beliefs) and the epistemology of belief (the grounds for our beliefs). Until these are carefully separated out, it is difficult to know how to interpret this claim." See his *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1985), p. 97.

cality must be reached from below rather than from above; they should not be presented *ex cathedra* but argued to and tested by a relevant set of examples" (Ibid.). Despite this scientific approach, Plantinga recognizes that the inductions and the relevant sets of examples used to support criteria for proper basicality will be largely influenced by the *Weltanschauung* or pre-understandings of the philosophers arguing a case. They will therefore be "person relative."[11] As he puts it,

> But there is no reason to assume, in advance, that everyone will agree on the examples. The Christian will of course suppose that belief in God is entirely proper and rational. . . . Followers of Bertrand Russell and Madelyn Murray O'Hare may disagree; but how is that relevant? Must my criteria, or those of the Christian community, conform to their examples? Surely not. The Christian community is responsible to its set of examples, not theirs. . . (Ibid.).

Eschewing, at least temporarily, the possibility of any kind of universal, neutral rationality that would provide some kind of objective and agreed upon criteria for proper basicality, Plantinga suggests that the theistic philosopher is fully rational and justified in taking God as a properly basic belief—even if others disagree. What is important is that the philosopher work with a set of examples that is appropriate for the philosophical or religious community which he or she serves. Presumably, that set of examples might provide a better, more effective epistemological paradigm that would cause others to consider its explanatory power regarding human ways of knowing—one that might even include the divine.[12]

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[11] For a cogent discussion of how world views affect perception, especially perception of God, see Joseph Runzo, *World Views and Perceiving God* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).

[12] Plantinga has recently published two new works (with a third to follow) that expand his epistemological project much further. In *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford, 1993) and *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford, 1993), Plantinga surveys and rejects as inadequate standard internalist and externalist theories of justification or warrant. The "blooming buzzing" confusion engendered by twentieth century epistemology he traces back to the classical epistemological deontologism of Descartes and Locke who both speak of epistemic duty and obligation (for Descartes

one must not believe anything that is not clear and distinct; for Locke there is the duty of apportioning belief to the evidence afforded by what is certain).

At the center of Plantinga's alternative is a fresh notion of what constitutes warrant which is, as he puts it, "a notion nearly all of us have and employ in our everyday pursuits" (*Current Debate*, p. 212). Warrant is best explained, he believes, not by producing a set of austerely necessary and jointly sufficient conditions that define it (which may work fine in logic, mathematics, and maybe the metaphysics of modality, but not in epistemology), but rather by means of paradigms which are "central, clear, and unequivocal cases of knowledge and warrant" (213). With regard to the central cases of warrant there is a "penumbral zone of possible cases" which are related to the central cases by analogy and extension and "an even more shadowy belt of possible cases beyond that one" ("borderline cases") where it is really not clear if what is possessed is warrant or knowledge at all. In any case, he says that "a good way to characterize our concept of warrant (more precisely: our system of analogically related concepts of warrant) is to specify the conditions governing the central paradigmatic core (here necessary and sufficient conditions are appropriate) together with some of the analogical extensions and an explanation of the analogical basis of the extension" (Ibid.).

Plantinga also connects very closely the notion of "proper function" to the central paradigms of knowledge and warrant. Also, the idea of proper function is "inextricably involved with another: that of the *design plan* of the organ or organism or system in question—the way the thing in question is supposed to work, the way it works when it works properly, when it is subject to no dysfunction" (Ibid.). "Design plan and proper function," he says, "are interdefinable notions: a thing . . . is functioning properly when it functions in accord with its design plan . . . (Ibid.). Thus, he argues that "the first condition for a belief's having warrant . . . is that it be produced by faculties functioning properly" (Ibid.). A second condition he specifies for warrant is that "the cognitive environment in which the belief is produced must be the one or like the one for which it is designed" (Ibid.). Alien cognitive environments (whatever they may be) render beliefs with little or no warrant at all. "The basic picture, here, is that we have cognitive faculties that are adapted (by God or evolution or both) to our surroundings, our cognitive environment; and when a belief is produced by these faculties functioning properly, then we have warrant" (214). Many other conceptions and qualifications round out his theory, but a final one is particularly important: he believes that it is extremely difficult if not impossible to give a naturalistic account of the notions of proper function, design plan, etc. Hence, he asserts that though his view falls under the heading of naturalistic epistemology, it "flourishes much better in the garden of supernatural theism than in that of metaphysical or theological naturalism" (Ibid.). As he puts it in the preface to *Warrant and Proper Function*, "naturalism in epistemology flourishes best in the context of supernaturalism in metaphysics; for . . . there appears to be no successful naturalistic account for the notion of proper function" (ix). Furthermore, he argues that "metaphysical naturalism when combined with contemporary evolutionary accounts of the origin and provenance of human life is an irrational stance; it provides for itself an ultimately undefeated defeater" (Ibid.). Hence, his thesis is ultimately dependent upon theism—the existence of the creator God and, presumably, God as a properly basic belief (see

In the following religio-theological response to Plantinga's proposal, a set of inductive examples will suggest that divinity may indeed have a place in the epistemological foundation or in a rational person's noetic structure. These examples will reinforce the importance of the current postmodern reevaluation of modern rationality which excludes this aspect from the knowing process.

A Religio-Theological Response

What I want to suggest most briefly is that Plantinga's rehabilitation of the notion of God as a properly basic belief is a notion that finds support in historic biblical, philosophical and religious traditions that coalesce to explain more adequately the nature of the universal human epistemological condition that entails a profound awareness of deity.

At the outset it would be helpful to point out that Plantinga's position is not just the revival of a sixteenth century religious protest, but is in fact deeply rooted in a specific strand of the Western philosophical and theological tradition. As Dewey Hoitenga has shown, "Reformed epistemology is not new bird at all, but a wise owl whose lineage can be traced back to Athena herself, or at least to her ancient city, and to Plato, its first great philosopher."[13] He traces the genealogy of the idea of the direct acquaintance of the human mind with God in the following manner.

> Plato's doctrine of the rational intuition of the Good, to which he ascribes some of the central characteristics of God, namely, being the transcendent source of the existence, intelligibility, and goodness of the universe; the Bible's teaching of the immediate knowability of the God's whose triune nature, activity in human history,

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Warrant and Proper Function, 197). It seems, then for Plantinga, that belief in God is not opposed to reason; rather it restores reason and enables one to think normally. Interestingly, the third projected volume in which these ideas are carried to be carried to fruition is entitled *Warranted Christian Belief* which will be an application of the theory developed in *Warrant and Proper Function* to Christian and theistic belief.

[13] Dewey J. Hoitenga, Jr., *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga: An Introduction to Reformed Epistemology* (Albany: State University of New York: 1991), p. xii.

> and will for human life it claims to reveal; Augustine's synthesis of the Platonic and biblical ideas in his doctrine of the direct illumination of the mind by the divine light; Calvin's reformulation of Augustine's ideas in his doctrine of the universal awareness of God and the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit; and Plantinga's version of Calvin's teaching in his doctrine of belief in God as a properly basic belief, a belief that constitutes knowledge of God when it is formed in the human mind by its noetic faculties functioning properly in the appropriate environment.[14]

From the scriptures of the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is not difficult to establish the idea that an awareness of God—both a sense of divinity and of moral consciousness—is revealed internally to humanity by direct awareness. From the protological text which declares humanity to be the image and likeness of God—no matter how this notion is understood and no matter how effaced it may be by sin—it would be reasonable to suppose that traces of the God whose image the race bears is transmitted through this ontological and existential characteristic. The *imago Dei* communicates the mystery of being, both human and divine, and leaves its mark in the depths of human consciousness, whether perspicuous or foggy. Related are the scriptural statements which affirm that God has implanted a sense of eternity within the human heart (Eccl. 3: 11) upon which are also inscribed the dictates of the moral law (Rom. 2: 14-15). These biblical notations may find an analogue and expression in the theological observations of Schleiermacher's notion of religion as the feeling of absolute dependence (or God consciousness), and Rudolph Otto's description of the experience of the holy or the numinous (*mysterium tremendium et fascinans*).[15] Finally, the Christian mystical

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[14] Hoitenga, p. 219.

[15] Under the influence of the Romantic movement, and in attempt to win the educated classes back to religion (see his *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, 1799), F. D. E. Schleiermacher redefined religion as "a sense and taste for the infinite," contending that religion was based on intuition and feeling (*Anschauung und Gefühl*), and independent of all doctrine and metaphysical reasoning. In his *The Christian Faith* (1721-22), he defined religion as the feeling of absolute dependence, and argued that the varieties of religions that exist are the multiple expressions of this impression. Schleiermacher's understanding of religion has close affinities with R. Otto

tradition, which may be understood as a "direct, nonabstract, unmediated, loving, [and] knowing of God," may also be tapping into something to which both the scriptures and the theologians testify.[16] The Judeo-Christian biblical, theological, and mystical tradition would seem to support the notion that belief in God may very well indeed, be properly basic.

This conception of divine proper basicality seems to characterize non-western religious traditions as well. Mircea Eliade's discussion of the identity of atman-Brahman and the experience of inner light in the Hindu tradition is illuminating in this regard.[17] In the Upanishads (800-500 B. C.), the name of the primary Hindu deity is Brahman, described in the *Chandogya Upanishad* (3. 14. 2-4) as being "the whole world" and yet spiritual in nature: "life is his body, his form is light, his soul is space," and so on[18]

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whose understanding of the same was based on extensive knowledge of comparative religion, oriental thought, and the natural sciences. The theme of his work is the attempt to understand and explain the episodic experience of the soul's encounter with "an ineffable something" (the numinous) that is both non-rational and universal and which is at the heart of all religions. He believed that the theologians of his day had overemphasized the rational element in religion and that a proper grasp of its transrational dimension should be recovered, not, however, at the total expense of the rational as the title of his most important book bears out: *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Nonrational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational* (1923, Eng. translation).

[16] D. D. Martin, "Mysticism," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology.* Walter Elwell, editor (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), p. 744.

[17] Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas: From the Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries.* Volume 1. Translated by Willard R. Trask (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 240-243. As Eliade points out, Indian philosophy is characterized by the fatal sequence of *avidya-karman-samsara*, (that is, ignorance, cause/effect, and reincarnation) and by the needed remedy or deliverance (*moska*) by means of gnosis or metaphysical knowledge (*jnana, vidya*). This is the central problem for Hindu religion as identified in the Upanishads (800-500 B. C.) and later in the *Bhagavad-Gita* (fourth century B. C.).

[18] According to Eliade, Yajnavalkya, in the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* (3. 7. 3), also describes Brahman as he "who dwells in the earth, yet the earth knows him not,

Brahman reveals himself as totally immanent in this world, and yet transcendent, distinct from the cosmos, and yet omnipresent in all cosmic realities. The Hindu tradition also contains the very important teaching that, *atman*—the human self or soul—is Brahman. The Upanishad quoted above continues by saying that Brahman is "my *atman* in the heart." As *atman*, then, Brahman inhabits the heart of man, which implies an identity between the true self and the prime, universal, divine being of Indian thought. As Eliade points out, meditations on the identity of *atman-Brahman* constitute a spiritual exercise, not a chain of reasoning that leads to this knowledge or identification. Through a series of yoga techniques and/or methods of mystical devotion, there is a grasping of one's own self in an experience of inner light (*antah-jyoti*) for light itself is the ancient image or epiphany of both *atman* and *Brahman*. It is this light of Brahman which is also *atman* that shines in the heart of man that reveals true identity. As the *Chandogya Upanishad* says (3. 13. 7), "The light that shines beyond this Heaven, beyond all, in the highest worlds beyond which there are none higher, is truly the same light that shines within man (*antah purusa*).[19]

These notions may underlie the strong Vedanta tradition in Hindu philosophy of religion which argues that though the existence of God cannot be proved by argument, he is self-evident, directly perceived, and experienced by means of direct intuition. Udayana, a scholar of the tenth century A. D., wrote a work (*Nayakusumanjali*) widely regarded as a classic of Hindu theism and whose proofs for the existence of God are as celebrated in Hinduism as Aquinas's are within Christianity. Nonetheless, he asserts in

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whose body is the earth and controls the earth from within," and also identifies him with the "atman, the inner controller, the immortal.

[19] Compare also The *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* (4. 3. 7.) which also identifies the *atman* with the heart of man, in the form of a "light in the heart." "That serene being, rising from its body and attaining the highest light, appears in its proper form. That being is *atman*. That is the immortal, the fearless. That is Brahman."

the introduction of his treatise that the universality of belief in God is a sufficient proof for his existence. As he puts it, ". . . with regard to that Being whom all men alike worship, . . . whom all recognize throughout the world as universally acknowledged, . . . *how can there arise any doubt*? and what then is there to be ascertained?"[20] He suggests that there can be no doubt about God, experience of whom is admitted throughout the world. So, any argument in support of His existence is unnecessary and redundant. For him, then, and according to aspects of Hindu thought, the notion of the divine is fundamental and foundational.

A similar understanding characterizes the thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr who, as the first Muslim ever to deliver the Gifford Lectures (1981), addressed the issue of knowledge and the sacred.[21] His line of argument is this. First of all, knowledge has become nearly completely externalized and desacralized, especially for those segments of the human race which have been transformed by the process of modernization. Because of the influence of modernity, he says that knowledge of the sacred "has become well-nigh unattainable and beyond the grasp of the vast majority of those who walk upon the earth."[22] Nevertheless, drawing on the full range of the great religious traditions (Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic), he affirms that the root and essence of genuine knowledge is inseparable from the sacred because the substance of genuine knowledge itself is knowledge of "the Supreme Substance, the Sacred as

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[20] Quoted in Arvind Sharma, *A Hindu Perspective on the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), p. 24. See the first chapter of this book on the topic "Grounds for Belief in God" for a very interesting Hindu outlook on the subject at hand.

[21] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989). Dr. Nasr is professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University.

[22] Nasr, p. 1.

such . . . ."[23] Thus, he asks, "how is the attainment of such knowledge possible?" and his answer, drawing on the Islamic tradition in particular, but applicable in general to anyone regardless of religious context, is that this knowledge of the sacred, the *Scientia Sacra*, is revelatory and innate.

> The answer of tradition is that the twin source of this knowledge is revelation and intellection or intellectual intuition which involves the illumination of the heart and the mind of man and the presence in him of knowledge of an immediate and direct nature which is tasted and experienced, the sapience which the Islamic tradition refers to as "presential knowledge" (*al-'ilm al-huduri*).[24]

This knowledge of the sacred is not obtained through reasoning (though he affirms that logic is an ontological property of humanity and that any truth itself is logical), but through revelation and a direct a priori intuition of the truth. As he puts it elsewhere, there are "degrees of descent of the Intellect [God] through the various levels of existence until man is reached, in whose heart the ray of Intellect still shines, although it is usually dimmed by the passions and the series of 'falls' that have separated man from what he really is."[25]

This set of inductive examples per Plantinga's suggestion, derived from significant aspects of the Western philosophical and theological tradition, and from global religious perspectives, which is obviously neither exhaustive nor conclusive, neverthe-

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[23] Ibid. Later on he writes very simply that "'knowledge of the Substance is the substance of knowledge,'" or knowledge of the Origin and the Source is the Origin and Source of knowledge" (p. 131).

[24] p. 130. For a very similar view, see Frithjof Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom.* (Pates Manor, Bedfont, Middlesex: Perennial Books, Ltd., 1959). Of Schuon, Nasr himself has written: "Schuon seems like the cosmic intellect itself impregnated by the energy of divine grace surveying the whole of the reality surrounding man and elucidating all the concerns of human existence in the light of sacred knowledge" (p. 107).

[25] Nasr, pp. 147-48.

less suggests the idea of a natural knowledge of God or sense of the divine.[26] Does this not imply that such a phenomenon is a central element in human experience, and indigenous to the human epistemological condition? Perhaps the universe is ontologically and epistemologically haunted by a non-natural reality or by God.[27] Perhaps Plantinga's notion of God as a properly basic and rational epistemological belief, radical though it may be in a modern Western context, is nevertheless congruent with the cogitations and experience of a larger portion of humanity that testifies to the same phenomenon. If so, then Plantinga's proposal stands as a provocative and tantalizing critique of Enlightenment rationality which has systematically, and yet abnormally, excluded the divine from the knowing process, and thereby impoverished Western human experience through its barren, and ultimately irrational secularism.

The Critique of Modernity and An Option for Postmodernity

There is no doubt that the "hermeneutics of suspicion" that the architects of modernity deployed in its deconstruction of the pre-modern period is now being aimed directed at modernity itself. Thus, the biblical admonition, "judge not lest ye be

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[26] Even the annual Gallup Poll in religion taken in the United States for the last five decades testifies year after year that the overwhelming majority of Americans—some 94-99%—believe "in God or a universal spirit" (George H. Gallup, Jr. and Robert Bezilla, "Survey of religious U.S. Belief shows lowest level recorded," *Dallas Morning News*, Saturday, February 26, 1994, Section A, p. 41). Of course, in the last several centuries, there have been many (e.g., E. Durkeim, L. Feuerbach, S. Freud, etc.) who have sought to argue that religion is to be accounted for on completely naturalistic grounds as a projection of human nature, or as wish-fulfillment, etc. For one of the most cogent attempts to offset this theory in the social sciences that seek to explain religion naturalistically, see E. E. Evans-Prichard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1965).

[27] This notion that the universe is "ontologically haunted" is from Dallas Willard, "The Three Stage Argument for the Existence of God," in *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, edited by R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 11, 212-224.

judged,"[28] finds salient application. This critical glance at modernity is not unfounded when, amidst its assets, features of the modernist paradigm are placed in the balance and found wanting. Modernity has glaringly failed to provide an adequate basis for morality and society, promulgated the myth of unmitigated scientific, technological, and economic progress, created an ecological disaster of unmitigated proportions, unleashed the twin specters of nihilism and fanaticism, thoroughly secularized knowledge, rendered the idea of God superfluous, and thereby made religious understanding and development exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, especially for the educated. Modernity in general, as Max Weber, Peter Berger, Robert Bellah and others have observed, transformed the "enchanted garden" of traditional culture into the "flat and disenchanted" modern culture that replaced it.[29] Given the fact that the pillars of the modern world view are beginning to crumble, it is no surprise that our intellectual culture is at a turning point, one as momentous as the original shift from pre-modernity to modernity itself. In the current maelstrom, the modern assumptions that kept religion at bay and deemed the Judeo-Christian tradition as intellectually inept are under suspicion and faltering as well. Given, then, the large-scale present-day critique of the modern mindset and especially ratio-evidentialist epistemology, Plantinga's theory may provide a legitimate option in an emerging postmodern context wherein the boundaries of the rationally and intellectually respectable are increased dramatically.[30]

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[28] "Do not judge lest you be judged *yourselves*. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it shall be measured to you" (Matthew 7: 1-2, NASV).

[29] This series of complaints against modernity are conflated from Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989) and Paul Brockelman, *The Inside Story: A Narrative Approach to Religious Understanding and Truth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

If one is not satisfied with Plantinga's proposal (and many are not), there are, of course, other alternative epistemological approaches to the God question that are currently being developed and under discussion by contemporary philosophers of religion. These options include (1) those who seek to revitalize the project of natural theology in various ways, including some on current scientific grounds (e. g., William Lane Craig, Richard Swinburne, Dallas Willard, Robert M. Adams); (2) those who advocate prudential accounts of religious belief such that one does not need *overwhelming* evidence for one's belief in God to be rational (Thomas V. Morris, William G. Lycan, George N. Schlesinger); (3) those who explore the relationship of religious experience to rational belief and argue that one might be able to experience God *directly* and thus bypass the need for evidence upon which the existence of God is inferred (William P. Alston, John Hick, James Kellenberger); and finally (4) those who embrace forms of Wittgensteinian fideism with its notion that religion is a language game based on a form

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30 Diogenes Allen, in the aforementioned book in the preceding note, is very bold when he says: "In a postmodern world Christianity is intellectually relevant. It is relevant to the fundamental questions, Why does the world exist? and Why does it have its present order, rather than another? It is relevant to the discussion of the foundations of morality and society, especially on the significance of human beings. The recognition that Christianity is relevant to our entire society, and relevant not only to the heart but to the mind as well, is a major change in our cultural situation" (pp. 5-6). Allen in a footnote cites the following works that document the breakdown of the modern mindset and the emergence of the postmodern world. Romano Guardini, *The End of the Modern World: A Search for Orientation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951); Frederick Ferré, *Shaping the Future: Resources for the Post-Modern World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976); Houston Smith, *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind* (New York: Crossroad, 1982); Harvey Cox, *Religion in the Secular City: Toward a Postmodern Theology* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984); Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). Also, the significance of this breakdown of modernity for Christianity, and a critique of Rorty's relativism is given by Richard J. Neuhaus, "After Modernity," *The Religion and Society Report* 5 (February 1988). Finally, *The Center Journal* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press) concerns the ongoing transition to postmodernity and its implications for religion and Christianity.

of life with its own internal criteria of meaning and rationality (D. Z. Phillips, Norman Malcolm, Paul L. Holmer).[31]

In any case, each of these models, Plantinga's included, offer critiques of the Enlightenment model of knowledge, and agree that rationality and religiosity are not mutually exclusive. The two cultures are being revisited, revised and rejoined. The principles of modern rationality enshrined in Descartes, Locke, Hume, Kant, et. al. are not impregnable after all. There is no longer no unqualified need to remain captive to the dictates of modern intellectual culture and its view of science, society, morality, and religion. There is no absolute demand to order the religious and theological enterprise according to modernity's stultifying and enfeebling propositions which are in a state of demise. One can possibly be both reasonable and religious simultaneously. In this revised setting, even the phrase "religious knowledge" may be oxymoronic no more.

Unfortunately many still remain ensconced in the modern schema, captive to its conceptual framework, asleep inside its prison though its walls have fallen. As poet Christopher Fry has reminded us in his play *A Sleep of Prisoners*, it is time to wake up:

> The human heart can go the lengths of God.
> Dark and cold we may be, but this
> Is no winter now. The frozen misery
> Of centuries breaks, cracks, begins to move,
> The thunder is the thunder of the floes
> The thaw, the flood, the upstart Spring.
> Thank God our time is now when wrong
> Comes up to face us everywhere,
> Never to leave us till we take
> The longest stride of soul men ever took.
> Affairs are now soul size.
> The enterprise
> Is exploration into God.[32]

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[31] For the development of this typology of religious epistemology that include critiques of each of these area proposals and also a section on contemporary atheism, see R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman, eds., *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[32] Christopher Fry, *A Sleep of Prisoners* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), pp. 47-48, quoted in Diogenes Allen, p. 8.