

c. Defeaters of Properly Basic Beliefs

Last time I argued that belief in God and in the great truths of the Gospel are properly basic beliefs, not only with respect to rationality, but also with respect to warrant through the witness of the Holy Spirit. So by means of the Spirit's witness we can be said to know that God exists and that these great things of the Gospel are true. Today we come to a very important question that I've been postponing for the last two weeks, and this is the question of defeaters of properly basic beliefs.

Plantinga emphasizes that the proper basicity of belief in God does not imply its indefeasibility. That is to say, this belief *is* defeatable – it can be defeated by other incompatible beliefs which come to be accepted by the theist. If a theist comes to accept beliefs which are incompatible with his belief in God, then he has a kind of cognitive dissonance. In order to remain rational he is going to have to give up some of his beliefs, and perhaps it will be his belief in God that he will give up in order to maintain his rationality. So, for example, imagine a Christian who is confronted with the problem of evil against the existence of God. He is thereby confronted with a potential defeater of his Christian belief in God. If he is to remain rational in his beliefs, he is going to have to have a defeater of this defeater of his Christian beliefs – a sort of defeater-defeater if you will. This is where Christian apologetics can come in; it can help to formulate answers to these potential defeaters. For example, the Free Will Defense could be a way of defeating the problem of evil.

But Plantinga also argues that in some cases the original belief itself may so exceed its alleged defeater in warrant that it actually

becomes an intrinsic defeater of its ostensible defeater. He gives the very interesting example of someone who has been accused of a crime which he knows that he did not commit and yet against whom all the evidence is stacked. So if a jury of his peers went on the basis of the evidence, they should convict him and find him guilty. Plantinga points out that such a person is not himself rationally obligated to follow the evidence to where it leads because he knows that he is innocent, and he knows that in a properly basic way. There is no need for him to give up that properly basic belief and to agree with his peers that he is, in fact, guilty. The belief that he did not commit the crime intrinsically defeats the defeaters brought against it by the evidence.

Plantinga makes the theological application by suggesting that belief in God may similarly intrinsically defeat all of the defeaters that are brought against it. Plantinga suggests that what could produce such powerful warrant for belief in God are the implanted, natural sense of God that he believes God has placed in our hearts, as well as the witness of the Holy Spirit which deepens and accentuates this inborn, innate sense of God.

Should a conflict arise between the witness of the Holy Spirit to the fundamental truths of the Christian faith and beliefs that are based on argument and evidence, then it is the former that takes precedence over the latter, rather than vice versa. So belief in God and the great things of the Gospel vouchsafed to us by the witness of the Holy Spirit are intrinsic defeaters of any alleged defeaters that might be brought against them.

Some people would disagree with this. They will ask how else could you determine which one is true, the Bible, the Qur'an, or

the Book of Mormon, unless we use argument and evidence to judge these? The Muslim or the Mormon also claims to have an inner witness of God's Spirit or a "burning in the bosom" which authenticates to them the truth of their respective Scriptures. Christian claims to a subjective experience, they say, just seem to be on a par with similar non-Christian claims.

How might we respond to this objection? As I already intimated in previous lessons, it seems to me that the fact that other persons falsely claim to have a witness of the Holy Spirit or a burning in the bosom does nothing to defeat the beliefs of a person who genuinely has the witness of the Holy Spirit to the truths of his faith. The existence of an authentic and unique witness of the Holy Spirit does not exclude in any way that there could be people who make false claims to such a thing. If that is the case, how does the existence of false claims to a witness of the Holy Spirit in favor of a non-Christian religion do anything logically to undermine the fact that the Christian believer does possess the actual and authentic witness of the Holy Spirit? Why should I be robbed of my joy and my assurance of salvation simply because somebody else falsely pretends, either sincerely or insincerely, to the Spirit's witness? If a Mormon or a Muslim falsely claims to experience the witness of God's Spirit to the truth of the Qur'an or Book of Mormon, that does nothing (it seems to me) to undermine the veridicality of my experience.

But someone might insist at this point, "But how do you know that *your* experience isn't also as spurious as theirs?" That question has already been answered: the experience of the Spirit's witness is self-authenticating for him who really has it. The Spirit-filled

Christian can know immediately that his claim to the Spirit's witness is true despite the presence of false claims made by other persons adhering to other religions.

When you are confronted with a Mormon or a Muslim or an adherent to some other faith claiming to know in a properly basic way that his faith is true, you can simply share with that person defeaters of that person's belief. Share with them objections to the Qur'an or objections to the historical veracity of the Book of Mormon, for example. As you share these defeaters with them, do so prayerfully trusting that God will use them to break down their false confidence because they don't really have an authentic witness of the Holy Spirit. They don't have a self-authenticating experience. They are misled by some sort of counterfeit experience. So the defeaters that you share with them will not be intrinsically defeated by their belief. Your defeaters may break through their false confidence and help to convince that person. Don't ever forget that while you share these defeaters the Holy Spirit is also quietly at work bearing genuine witness to that person's heart to the truth of the Gospel. He can remain a non-Christian only by ignoring and resisting the conviction and the drawing of God's Spirit upon his heart. Don't be cowed by false claims to a self-authenticating witness of the Holy Spirit. Rather, when you confront such persons, share with them defeaters for their belief and pray for them that God's Spirit would convict their hearts and draw them to him.

If we want to press the discussion forward a notch, I think that the most plausible spin that a person could put on this objection would

be to say that false claims to a witness of the Holy Spirit ought to undermine my confidence in the reliability of the cognitive faculties which form religious beliefs, because those faculties evidently so often mislead people. You see so many false religions in the world, it would seem you just can't have any confidence in the cognitive faculties that lead to religious beliefs because by your own admission most people have false beliefs as a result of these faculties. The fact that so many people apparently sincerely, but falsely, believe that God's Spirit is testifying to them of the truth of their religion ought to make us leery about our own experience of God. Why should we trust our experience when we think that everybody else's experience is untrustworthy?

I think there are at least two things wrong with this statement of the objection. First, as Christians we don't need to say that every non-Christian religious experience is simply spurious – that it is totally invalid. It may well be the case that adherents of other religions do enjoy a veridical experience of God in certain respects. For example, in pantheistic religions the experience of God as the Ground of Being upon whom we contingent creatures depend moment by moment for our existence. Or in certain religions an experience of God as the Moral Absolute from whom moral duties and values derive. Or even a religious experience of God as the loving Father of mankind. We don't need to say that all of these experiences of God are just spurious. We are not committed to saying that the cognitive faculties which are responsible for people's religious beliefs are fundamentally unreliable.

Secondly, the objection unjustifiably assumes that the witness of the Holy Spirit is indistinguishable from the products of human cognitive faculties. That is simply not true. It is just a sociological fact that non-Christian religious experience, such as Buddhist or Hindu religious experience, is typically very different from Christian experience. Why should I think that when a Mormon says that he has a “burning in the bosom” that the Book of Mormon is true, this is qualitatively indistinguishable from the witness of the Holy Spirit that I experience? I don’t see any reason to think that these non-veridical religious experiences that people have are qualitatively indistinguishable from the witness of the Holy Spirit. One way to get evidence of this fact would be to just simply ask converts to Christianity from those other religions if their experience is any different now. Ask ex-Mormons or ex-Muslims who have become Christians, “Is your experience of God now different than when you were a Mormon or a Muslim?” I think in most cases they will say, absolutely it is different! They’ve come to know God in a different personal way. It is simply not correct to say that the witness of the Holy Spirit is indistinguishable from these counterfeit religious experiences.

Somebody might say (and I’ve heard it said), “But can’t neuroscientists artificially stimulate the brain to have religious experiences which are obviously non-veridical and yet they are like the witness of the Holy Spirit?” Maybe a brain scientist could stimulate your brain to make you think you have a witness of the Holy Spirit to the truth of Christianity. Again, as a factual matter, that is not true. The sort of religious experiences that neuroscientists have been able to artificially induce by brain stimuli are more akin to pantheistic religious experiences, like in

Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism – a sort of sense of oneness with the All, where you lose your personal identity in the totality of everything, the Absolute. They are not like Christian experiences of God’s personal presence and love. So it is simply not true that neuroscientists have been able to induce anything like the witness of the Holy Spirit in people.

But more importantly, the fact that a non-veridical experience can be induced which is qualitatively identical to a veridical experience does absolutely nothing to undermine the fact that there are veridical experiences and that we are rational in taking those experiences to be veridical. Otherwise, you would have to say that because neuroscientists can induce in your brain experiences of seeing an object or having a hallucination of something, that therefore your five senses are utterly unreliable and you should never trust them when you do see an object. Just because a neurologist can artificially stimulate your brain to make you think that you are having an experience of some object is no reason at all to doubt that when you are not under such artificial stimulus that your experiences of such objects are not veridical. Similarly, even if a scientist could artificially stimulate my brain to make me think I am having an experience of God, that does nothing to undermine the veridicality of my experience of God when I am not under artificial stimulus from a neuroscientist.

So the objection to a self-authenticating witness of the Spirit on the basis of these sorts of false claims to such an experience does not undermine my rationally trusting in the deliverances of the Holy Spirit and his testimony to the existence of God and the great truths of the Gospel.

Let me proceed to suggest two theological reasons why I think that those Christians who do think that the rationality of Christian belief depends upon arguments and evidence are mistaken. I call such a position theological rationalism. It is often called evidentialism, but that label seems misleading to me. Theological rationalism says that religious belief is irrational in the absence of sufficient arguments and evidence. I have two objections to such a view.

First, such a view would consign most Christians to irrationality. Think about it. The vast majority of the human race have neither the time, nor the training, nor the library resources to develop a full-blown Christian apologetic as the basis of their faith. Even the proponents of theological rationalism were at one time early in their education still presumably lacking such an apologetic.

According to theological rationalism, these people should not have believed in Christ until they had finished their apologetic.

Otherwise, they would be believing for insufficient reasons. I remember when I was a seminary student at Trinity, I asked one of my classmates, "How do you know that Christianity is true?" He said to me, "I really don't know." Does that mean that he should have been a non-Christian at that point? That he should reject Christ out of his life until he can come up with an answer to that question? Obviously not! He knew Christianity was true because he knew Jesus, even though he had not yet worked out some sort of an apologetic for the Christian faith. The fact is that we can know the truth whether we have rational arguments or not. The vast majority of Christians throughout the world and down through history have never been in a position where they could justify their Christian beliefs in a rational way through argument and evidence.

Someone has rightly said that if God just abandoned us to work out by our own reason whether or not He exists, then getting into heaven would be like getting into Harvard.

The second reason I want to give for rejecting theological rationalism is that if theological rationalism were legitimate, then a person who had been given poor arguments for Christianity would have a just excuse for not believing in God. Imagine somebody who had been given an invalid argument for God's existence. Could that person stand before God on the Judgment Day and say, "God, those Christians only gave me this lousy invalid argument for believing in you. That's why I didn't believe"? No! The Bible says that all men are without excuse. Even those who are given no good reason to believe and many good reasons not to believe are ultimately without excuse, because the ultimate reason that they do not believe is because they deliberately reject the testimony of God's own Holy Spirit to the great truths of the Gospel.

So it seems to me that a person knows that Christianity is true fundamentally because the Holy Spirit tells him that it is true, and while argument and evidence can be used to confirm this truth, it cannot legitimately be used to defeat it or override it. The witness of the Holy Spirit is an intrinsic defeater of any defeaters that are brought against it.

Someone might say, "I'm a Christian, but I don't have such a witness of the Holy Spirit!" I want to say here that the witness of the Holy Spirit can vary from person to person. I don't see any reason to think that God can't increase the intensity of the Holy Spirit's witness as need be. It may well be that the witness of the Holy Spirit that you have right now may not seem sufficient to

overcome great defeaters against the Christian faith, but it is sufficient for you right now. But imagine a student, say, raised in the old Soviet Union and indoctrinated with Marxist propaganda throughout his schooling and his university career. In order for that person to believe and intrinsically defeat the defeaters brought against him, God may intensify the witness of the Holy Spirit to a degree that is far beyond what you or I experience here. In other words the witness of the Holy Spirit can vary in its intensity relative to the circumstances and the needs. What God won't permit is for a person to be in a situation where the rational thing for him to do is to apostatize, to reject Christ and become a non-Christian.

Even if the witness of the Holy Spirit in your life may not seem powerful enough to defeat every defeater, it may well be the case for those who are confronted with very powerful defeaters that they experience a more intense witness of the Holy Spirit that will be sufficient for their perseverance in the faith.

That leads us finally to step three of the argument:

3. Therefore, belief that the biblical God exists may be rationally accepted as a basic belief not grounded on argument.

I would just add, as we've seen, that that properly basic belief is properly basic not only with regard to rationality but also with respect to warrant so that we can be said to know on the basis of the Holy Spirit's witness that God exists and the great truths of the Gospel are indeed true.