

**An Interview with
Professor Alvin Plantinga
on
"Theism as a Properly Basic Belief"**

by Roy Varghese, Executive Editor, Truth

Q. If we accept belief in God as rational on the grounds which you have presented, how do we also know that this belief is true?

A. You have to think about that in the context of the same question with respect to perception or memory or other minds. Fundamentally, in these cases it is a matter of trusting one's cognitive faculties, I guess. It seems true. One's inclined to believe in other minds, one's inclined to believe in the past, one's inclined to believe in immaterial objects and many of us are also under certain circumstances inclined to believe in God. I don't know if there's any way of getting outside of our faculties in these cases and sort of checking the matter independently. I don't know how one would do this.

Q. Some English philosophers-Farrer, Mascall, Trethowan, Owen, Lewis-see belief in God as being a fundamental insight triggered by certain experiences or under certain circumstances instead of seeing it as the end-product of an inferential process.

A. I'd go along with that. But I would say that for many people it's not so much a matter of coming to an insight by virtue of long hard thinking. It's more a matter of just being inclined, as Calvin says, under various circumstances, to form this belief about God.

Q. I would think these philosophers would hold that an unlettered farmer in touch with nature would be better endowed in coming to such an insight than a sophisticated city-dweller.

A. I have no objection to that. In *Reason and Belief in God* I mention a bunch of circumstances that according to Calvin-and I think he's right-call forth belief in God: gratitude, a sense of contingency, just beholding the beauties of nature sometimes- mountains, flowers and the like of that-being in danger. All sorts of things.

Q. These philosophers, as I understand them, would compare this fundamental insight to something like visual perception: its truth cannot be checked with reference to external criteria: you *see* it to be true: it is self-guaranteeing or self-authenticating.

A. I don't think it's self-authenticating or self-guaranteeing in any of these cases. In the case of perception, for example, it could be we're all mistaken, it could be we're being deceived by a Cartesian demon or something like that.

Q. But at least we can be certain that we are having an apparent perception.

A. It's logically possible that these other things are so. I don't for a minute think that they are so, and I don't think that the fact that these are logically possible means that we don't know any of these. One question is whether you know these things. And another question is what's your evidence or how do you prove these things. I think you know something when that belief is true and when it's produced in you by your faculties working properly. God has created us with a lot of faculties and I know a perceptual belief is a true proposition when I believe it and it's true and it's produced in me by my faculties working the way they were designed to work. But that doesn't mean I can prove it to some sceptic. That's a whole different question. Knowledge is one thing, being able to prove it to a sceptic is a wholly different thing.

Q. The fact you can't prove the truth of it does not mean you haven't had an insight or that the insight isn't valid.

A. It doesn't mean you don't know either. It's not as if in order to know it you have to be able to prove it to the sceptic.

Q. Doesn't an inferential argument for God's existence already presuppose this fundamental insight? The conclusion is implicit in the premises.

A. The argument might be a probabilistic one of some kind like Swinburne's. I guess it wouldn't have to be the case that the argument somehow presupposes the belief to start off with. But an argument always presupposes that you trust or that you're relying upon some other faculties or some other belief-producing processes or cognitive processes. You reason from them to the one in question.

Q. How do you relate this belief to common sense or common experience; God's existence has seemed obvious to the vast majority of mankind.

A. It has seemed true to the vast majority of mankind that some being worthy of worship, whom we all worship and who is responsible for our existence and the like, that some such being does exist. I think that has been obvious to the bulk of mankind. That's fundamentally what Calvin is saying when he speaks of the *sensus divinitatis*.

Q. So would you say you're remaining faithful to common sense and the common experience of mankind?

A. Yes. Right, I would. I don't have any objection to giving the arguments [for God's existence] and the arguments are no doubt useful in some contexts. All I say is they're not necessary either for rationality or for knowledge.

Q. Arguments may be useful in triggering off the insight into God's existence.

A. They may be useful for that. Well, they could be useful, I suppose, in a variety of ways. They reveal connections between other things one already believes like the ontological argument. And maybe they move certain people closer to belief in God.

Q. Some critics of this approach claim that the examples of properly basic beliefs you cite (e.g. seeing a tree) are not sufficiently similar to belief in God for the latter to qualify as properly basic. For one thing, they say, belief in God is not universal like some of the other beliefs.

A. People have said that, but I don't know why I should believe that. That is, I'm not arguing that belief in God is properly basic because it so greatly resembles such experience. I was just trying to point out various analogies, illustrating points about proper basicity of theistic belief by pointing to similar things in the case of sense-experience. It was an illustration or analogy rather than a matter of arguing from its similarity to a sense-experience to its being properly basic like sense-experience. Things that are properly basic come in a wide variety of forms. Memory, *a priori* reasoning, what you're taught or told by other people, and so on.

Q. How do you think the "theism as a properly basic belief" approach should be presented in the philosophical community?

A. It's not a presentation of theism as such. To present theism is to say what God is like-about His attributes, knowledge, foreknowledge, middle knowledge, power, whether He's simple. It's not that. It has to do, rather, with what might be called epistemology of religious belief.

Q. Do you think this is the most fruitful approach?

A. I think it is. I think it's true anyway and so, I guess, most fruitful.