

Evidentialism and Anti-Evidentialism: Must One Be Right?

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Peter: "Master, we have worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the net" (Luke 5.5)

Thomas: "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it" (John 20.25)

Debate and disagreement between evidentialists and anti-evidentialists regarding Christian belief^{1[1]} seems increasingly intense. The debate, I surmise, is rather old, perhaps two millennia old. But over the past 20 years, at least since the publication by Alvin Plantinga of "Reason and Belief in God,"^{2[2]} the debate has intensified. In this essay, I sketch the evidentialist and the anti-evidentialist positions. I use Peter and Thomas, from the quotations above, to characterize possible Christian models for approaching the issues. This enables me to identify what I take to be the most important lesson from the work done over the past 3 decades by Alvin Plantinga. I discuss some of the advantages, as I see it, of the Plantingian approach to Christian believing. I am then able to show why I think we should not think of the debate as having to lead to either evidentialism or anti-evidentialism. Rather, they are distinct approaches to the matter of Christian believing and can serve distinct roles. I conclude by sketching a schema of evidentialist and anti-evidentialist perspectives, which enables me to explain why the debate is intense: the contestants are picking targets that miss sensible versions of the theories under debate. Once we realize that, we can then see the merits of both evidentialist and anti-evidentialist perspectives, rightly understood.

The positions

^{1[1]} By "Christian belief" I mean just those components common to the ecumenical creeds, for example most of what is asserted in the Apostle's Creed.

^{2[2]} Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God" in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

One of the topics discussed under the rubric of philosophy of religion is whether Christian belief (including belief in the existence of God) is intellectually or rationally acceptable. As Thomas Aquinas puts the question “Can the existence of God be demonstrated?” An assumption is that if it cannot be demonstrated, then Christian belief is not intellectually or rationally acceptable; it is not a belief supportable by evidence and reasons. And if not intellectually or rationally acceptable, then no person holding Christian belief can be considered within their intellectual or rational rights in their so believing. I generalize, but there are two schools of thought on this question. One holds that Christian belief can be demonstrated, that belief in God is indeed rational. The other holds that Christian belief cannot be demonstrated, that it is a non-rational belief maintainable only by faith (where faith seems to me believing something when the evidence does not adequately support it). For now, I am going to ignore the second school of thought. I will make mention of this second school toward the end.

Within the first school of thought, the school that holds that Christian belief can be demonstrated, there is an important distinction between those on the one hand who hold that for any individual’s Christian belief to be rational, it must be held on the basis of proper and adequate evidence; and on the other hand those who hold that an individual can be rational in her Christian belief even while lacking a set of evidence that would make the belief properly demonstrable. Now I prefer the term “evidence” over that of “reason.” Why? Because I want to maintain a distinction between reasons and causes. Sometimes, maybe often, when someone is asked why they believe in God, they cite causes for their belief: I was raised in a Christian home; or someone I knew had a great life and when I found out it was because they were Christian, I decided to do the same; or I had a set of circumstances in my life that pushed me to the end of myself where I had to turn to Christianity. But these are not the sorts of things that would make Christian belief intellectually or rationally acceptable. Think of the following example. If you asked me why I believe Lance Armstrong will win the Tour de France this summer, and I responded: I put the names of leading contenders in a hat and drew out Armstrong; I would thereby explain how I came to that belief, but would not explain how my belief is rational or intellectually acceptable. Thus in asking whether my belief is rational or intellectually acceptable, I would show my belief rational if I could offer evidence and point to the probable inferences from that evidence to my belief.

Now what do I mean by evidentialism and anti-evidentialism? Evidentialists are those who hold that for any individual's Christian belief to be rational, it must be held on the basis of proper and adequate evidence; you must have grounds for the belief. Anti-evidentialists are those who hold that an individual can be rational in her Christian belief even while lacking a set of evidence that would make the belief properly demonstrable; you do not need grounds for the belief; Christian belief can be taken as a basic or immediate belief. It is rational for me to believe immediately when I look out my office window that the apple tree is blossoming. I do not take my perceptual inputs as evidence from which I infer that it is blossoming. I form the belief as I see it. Perhaps also as I hear someone preach, I form Christian belief. I need not take the preaching, or its content, as evidence from which to infer Christian belief. I form the belief as I hear it. One way of putting the question in regard to Christianity is: am I to be considered rational in my acceptance of the Christian belief if I do not believe on the basis of evidence? Evidentialists say no, not at all. Anti-evidentialists say maybe, it all depends.

Peter and Thomas: possible Christian models

In this section I use Peter and Thomas, perhaps my caricatures of them (but not, I think ludicrous), to characterize possible models for approaching the issues of evidentialism and anti-evidentialism. I do not claim that my versions of Peter and Thomas are the correct depictions of these Biblical characters. I see them as, at least in these particular situations, as depicting the contrasting positions.

Peter, I surmise, is not (at least not here at *Luke 5.5*) an evidentialist. For he appeals to the paucity of evidence, or negative evidence, for the instruction that Jesus has given him. Peter and his pals had just spent the night fishing, were on shore in the morning washing and mending their nets, hanging them to dry so that they would be ready to go out again the next night. Jesus commandeered one of their boats to sit in off shore to teach the crowds that had followed him. After he finished teaching, he told Peter to head out to the deep water, put down his nets. It was the wrong time to fish, perhaps mid morning, and in the wrong place, in the deep water. Clearly Peter is the expert here. His vocation was fishing, Jesus' was carpentry. All Peter's evidence indicates that the fishing was done for the day. But Jesus tells him to set out the nets once more. He does not take Jesus' instruction as a piece of testimony from which he infers that he too ought to hold the belief being testified. By testimony, I mean a belief that one would have reason to accept

not because one has access to the grounds of that belief, but because one would expect the testifier to know what she or he is talking about. In this case, Peter is the fisherman, Jesus is not. Just on those grounds alone Peter cannot accept Jesus' word as testimony. Nor do I see some other way that Peter might accept Jesus' instruction as a piece of evidence to counter or trump all the other evidence Peter has. Peter at this point has not yet become a follower of Jesus, nor has he confessed that Jesus is the Christ (and it was not likely until after the resurrection that he began to understand that Jesus was divine and thus a source for authority and truth). Jesus' instruction is not taken by Peter as a piece of evidence. In spite of what Peter believes based on evidence available to him, he accepts Jesus' instruction.

This, it seems to me, is an instance of a basic belief. What is the basic belief? Perhaps Peter forms the belief "my fishing will be successful" and forms it not on the basis of a belief about the reliability of Jesus' instruction or on the testimony of Jesus (he does not have the right credentials to be a believable testifier on fishing). Neither does he form the belief as an inference from Jesus' instructions. It is more like (but not the same as) a memory or perceptual belief. Just as the presence of a blooming apple tree outside my window causes me to believe a blooming apple tree is there—it is not that the presence of a blooming apple tree or my perceptual inputs are taken by me as evidence from which I infer a belief—so also Jesus' instruction causes Peter to believe—it is not taken as a piece of evidence from which to infer a belief.

On the other hand, we have Thomas. Thomas is an evidentialist, and perhaps an internalist (i.e. the evidence has to be for him accessible to him upon introspection—after he touches and feels, he will have the right mental state from which to infer that indeed the crucified, dead, and buried Jesus is risen and visible). The evidence needs to be available to me directly and it needs to be adequate (see with my eyes, touch with my finger, put my hand in his side). Still, the impression one gets in reading *John* is that Thomas' evidentialism is not preferable. After Thomas gets enough of the right evidence, he confesses belief. Then Jesus says, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (*John* 20.29). I do not interpret Jesus' words as scolding Thomas; he indulges Thomas' need. Thomas is an evidentialist, and Jesus does not demand that he change and become an anti-evidentialist. He offers him the evidence. Jesus does not commend him for his need or demand for

evidence. However, that Jesus describes the other sort of believer, the one who believes without evidence, as blessed gives strong reason to think Jesus approves of such anti-evidentialist believers.

My general impression is that the Biblical authors give higher praise to those who believe without evidence, those who believe simply as a result of the Lord's word. It portrays Peter as more exemplary than Thomas. To be sure, there is no condemnation of Thomas; it is just that his approach is seen as less than the best. And based upon the lack of condemnation for Thomas' approach, I would judge that evidentialism is permissible. But it is not compulsory. Indeed, given the more consistent praise for approaches like Peter's, it seems that anti-evidentialism, that taking Christian belief as basic and properly basic, is preferable. Note well that anti-evidentialism, that taking Christian belief as properly basic, is not required.

A Lesson from Plantinga

Something like the situation I just described regarding Peter is what I take to be a central lesson from Plantinga's project. His claim is that a believer *can* be warranted, justified, and rational in her Christian belief even if she does not believe on the basis of evidence.^{3[3]} He does not say that a genuine or sincere or God-honoring believer *must* take Christian belief as properly basic, *must not* believe on the basis of evidence. That seems to be the view attributed to Barth or Kierkegaard: if you believe on the basis of evidence, it is not longer belief or faith but knowledge (and God, this view holds, seeks people of faith). This is close to the view I mentioned earlier, that Christian belief is non-rational and can only be held by faith. The evidentialist, as I understand him, seems to think that for a believer to be warranted, justified, and rational in her Christian belief she *must* believe on the basis of evidence. One *cannot* take Christian belief as properly basic and be warranted, justified, intellectually acceptable and rational in her Christian belief. For rationally and intellectually acceptable Christian belief, good evidence is required. Thomas, for the evidentialist, would be our model, not Peter.

This is one reason why I prefer Plantinga's project (or since I do not want to pin my views on Plantinga, maybe I should say "my appropriation of Plantinga's project") to that of the evidentialist. The

^{3[3]} See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford, 2000) 99-102, 175-179. Plantinga's view might be more radical than this construal has it. For the Christian believer can be warranted, justified, and rational even if the evidence is on the whole not very good, at least not good enough to convince religion's cultured despisers.

Christian believer can be warranted, justified, and rational in her belief even if it is not derived for her from evidence. My mother is within her epistemic rights in holding her Christian belief. She need not seek evidence. Now when my mother faces challenges to her Christian belief, say when her son decides to become a philosopher instead of doing something useful with his life (“how can there really be a good God given such a circumstance?” she thinks), she may have to seek ways to assess or rebut such challenges. Her response to such challenges need not be by appeal to evidence that would entail a rebutting belief. Her evidence might not satisfy religion’s cultured despisers. She might simply assert that she trusts God in all things, including this one. And, I would hold, her belief is warranted, justified, and rational.

On the other hand, were I as a philosopher, a more intellectually inclined Christian believer than my mother, presented with a rationality challenge to my Christian belief, say Draper’s formulation of the problem of evil,^{4[4]} I might be under (or at least “feel”) a different obligation. That is because as a philosopher, I ought to be interested in reasons, and form my beliefs in the light of good evidence. I might have initially come to Christian belief just because the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit enlivened my *sensus divinitatis*, enabling me to believe that yes, Christ’s atoning work, bearing the sins of the world on the cross in the horrific abandonment by God, was an atoning work for me. Still I qua philosopher may need to pay closer attention to evidence, reasons, defeaters, and challenges to defeaters than my mother does.

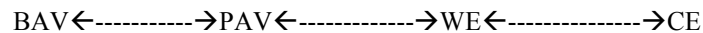
All this is to say that there is room in Christianity, just as there was apparently room among the apostles, for both evidentialists and anti-evidentialists, for Peter and for Thomas, for my mother and for me. For philosophers, perhaps especially for Christian philosophers, to insist that *either* one must be an evidentialist, that anti-evidentialists have given up on rationality, *or* one must be an anti-evidentialist, that evidentialists are playing poker with the devil (or his minions), is to engage in a pissing match. Well, that isn’t precisely the correct simile. Maybe it is more like those who dispute whether fruit or vegetables are better for you, and one side thinks fruit only, the other side thinks vegetables only. Or, closer to home it would be as if someone were to insist that every Christian ought to be a Presbyterian while the other side insists that every Christian ought to be a Roman Catholic (that we—whichever side the “we” is—has the corner on the truth of the matter). I am not saying that we should all just hold hands, forget about our

^{4[4]} Paul Draper, “Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists” in Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed. *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996) 12-29.

differences, and sing Kumbaya. What I am suggesting is that evidentialists ought to do their best to make the best evidential case they can for Christian belief so that those of us who are Thomases, or have our Thomas moments, can avail ourselves of that evidence and argument in order to quiet our doubting hearts and minds. Anti-evidentialists ought to do their best to make the case for how Christian belief can be properly basic so that those of us who are Peters, or have our Peter moments, can rest in the face of challenges (from my experience, from intellectual critics, from religion’s cultured despisers) without having to seek ways to rationally rebut the challenges in such a way that would begin from “neutral” presuppositions shared by both believer and despiser. Bill, who runs a soup kitchen and shelter, and tries to point folks to Christ, is probably doing better not to spend his time on constructing and organizing rational evidence in the face of challenges—and he is within his epistemic rights to do so. The rational thing for him to do is to not seek evidence and proper inferences. The rational thing is to keep cooking, sheltering, and pointing. I, on the other hand, am probably doing a better job in the kingdom of God as a philosopher than were I to try to minister in a soup kitchen and shelter. What counts as “reasonable service” (*Romans* 12.1) is not the same for both of us.

Schema of positions

Perhaps what is going on and leads to some confusion and misdirected criticism is that there are four general types of positions to take on evidentialism and anti-evidentialism, with several possible instantiations of the types in between each type. So think of a continuum. At one end is staunch anti-evidentialism (perhaps Barthian or Kierkegaardian or Wittgensteinian anti-evidentialism, or fideism), and the other end is staunch (Cliffordian) evidentialism. Between these is moderate anti-evidentialism (Plantingian—or my bastardized version of it—anti-evidentialism), and moderate evidentialism (Wykstrian evidentialism^[5]).



^[5] Named after Stephen J. Wykstra. See his “‘Not Done in a Corner’: How to be a Sensible Evidentialist about Jesus” *Philosophical Books* 43 (2002) 92-116; “Toward a Sensible Evidentialism: On the Notion of ‘Needing evidence’” in William Rowe and William Wainwright (eds.) *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion* 2nd ed (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989) 426-437; “Externalism, Proper Inferentiality, and Sensible Evidentialism” *Topoi* 14 (1995) 107-121.

Barthian anti-evidentialists think that one should not seek evidence to make one's Christian belief rational because belief in God is not rational, or is supra-rational. Further, if one seeks evidence for Christian belief, one is not being faithful. Seeking evidence causes one to risk losing God's favor. Perhaps one of the motivations toward the BAV position is that there is some reason to think that religious belief, especially Christian belief, requires passion, courage, and commitment. And if one accepts Christian belief without evidence, or even against evidence ("I believe because it is absurd"), that in itself demonstrates that the belief is held with passion, courage, and commitment. For if Christian belief were to follow probably or necessarily as a conclusion from a set of good evidence, one could hold the belief without passion, courage, or commitment. It is as if lack of evidence guarantees that the belief must be passionate, courageous, and committed. Furthermore, the Christian believer is not able, and should not even try, to persuade others to accept Christian belief, or to persuade others, by appeal to evidence and inferences from the evidence, of the rationality of one's own Christian belief. Further still, some hold, the Christian believer is incapable of a reasoned response to the challenge regarding the rational preferability of Christian belief in comparison to Jewish, or Islamic, or Hindu, or Buddhist, or Amer-Indian, or African nature, or Wiccan, or Humanist, or Great Pumpkin religious belief.

Cliffordian evidentialists think that one is entitled to believe only that for which one has adequate evidence that inferentially supports one's beliefs. As Clifford says, "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."^[6] Of course the evidentialist need not think that the evidence must deductively entail the belief. I think the staunch evidentialist is not that far out. Were that the standard of rational belief, there would be pitifully too little worthy of our rational belief. Instead the evidence can support inductively (probabilistically) or abductively (explanatorily) the belief. Yet in order to avoid the charge of irrationality or absurdity, the belief must be in one of these ways logically supported by the evidence. Perhaps for the evidentialist Christian believer, having the right beliefs supported in the right way is far more important than believing passionately or courageously or committedly. Staunch evidentialist Christian believers think that Christian belief is supported (inductively or abductively) by the evidence. If the Christian believer wishes to believe rationally, she must identify, assess, and believe in proportion to the evidence. Believing other than one's evidence permits is to fail in

^[6] W.K. Clifford, *The Ethics of Belief*, 1879, public domain. Accessed from <http://ajburger.homestead.com/files/book.htm> p. 6.

rationality. Indeed, perhaps the story goes, God gave us senses and minds, and, as some think *Romans* 1.20 indicates, the evidence is before our perceptions and is adequate for knowledge of God (perhaps not, though, natural knowledge of the Gospel, which according to the Apostle's Creed is: "Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried, he descended into Hell, and on the third day rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty"). We would dishonor God if we did not use our full perceptual and rational capacities to acquire knowledge of God.

Plantingian anti-evidentialists believe that one *can* be rational in one's Christian belief without having (introspectively available) evidence. Indeed one can be rational without knowing or believing that there is evidence held by someone. If one believed others had that evidence, one need not be able to avail oneself of that evidence (or be able to understand it if accessed). To be rational, justified, and especially warranted in one's Christian belief requires forming beliefs as a result of one's cognitive faculties functioning properly in a cognitive environment appropriate for our kind of cognitive faculties in accordance with a design plan successfully aimed at truth.^{7[7]} The Plantingian anti-evidentialist does not disparage those who seek reasons for belief, even reasons that are introspectible and from which they can infer Christian belief. Some may form Christian belief as an inference from evidence. But that does not compel any particular Christian believer to form her beliefs in such a way. A Christian believer can be warranted, rational, and justified in her Christian belief without evidence.

The Wykstrien evidentialist believes that the evidence for Christian belief is strong and rationally persuasive. But not all reasoned inquirers will be compelled by the evidence. Nor need the Christian believer access or understand the evidence. Perhaps when the Christian believer faces a practical or theoretical challenge to her Christian belief, she would do well to seek evidence and assess the evidence. The evidence for Christian belief is strong, and can serve to quiet one's restless heart. The Christian believer should not shy away from admitting that the evidence is good, darn good evidence. There is better historical evidence for the belief that Jesus rose from the dead than for the belief that Caesar died in the

^{7[7]} Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, xi, 156. Plantinga's language: "a belief has warrant for a person *S* only if that belief is produced in *S* by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for *S*'s kind of cognitive faculties, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth. We must add, furthermore, that when a belief meets these conditions and does enjoy warrant, the *degree* of warrant it enjoys depends on the strength of the belief, the firmness with which *S* hold it" (156).

Capitol. *Fides quarens intellectum* does not endanger one's faith as the Barthian anti-evidentialist might think. Indeed, one's faith can be deepened, enhanced, encouraged, and strengthened by finding that the evidence is strong, that one's Christian belief is intellectually respectable. One is within one's epistemic rights in believing without evidence. But the evidence is there and it is sometimes a bit puzzling why one will not avail oneself of the evidence. But there is no duty to only believe in accordance with one's evidence as the Cliffordian evidentialist might require.

Conclusion

How do I conclude? I offered a sketch of positions that I believe count as permissible Christian responses to the issue of the rationality or intellectual acceptability of Christian belief. There is not one right way to maintain one's Christian belief. One's responsibilities in regard to the possible evidence depends in large part on one's position and needs in life. I see plenty of room within Christianity for the Plantingian anti-evidentialist, and the Wykstrain evidentialist. I would like to see room for the Cliffordian evidentialist, except that all I have met have the attitude that they are right and everyone else is wrong. And I would like to see room for the Barthian anti-evidentialist, except that all I have met have the attitude "I believe because it is absurd," and that those who seek evidence are risking their faith. Still, I guess there is overwhelming empirical evidence that there is room in Christianity for such folks too!

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