

On the Historical Argument A Rejoinder to Plantinga

TIMOTHY MCGREW
Department of Philosophy
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan

LYDIA MCGREW
Kalamazoo, Michigan

People think it sufficient to reason from generalities which, far from being universally true, are often not even probable when considered in connection with the particular circumstances of the events under examination. We must consider the event in relation to its circumstances, not as separate from them.

Antoine Arnauld, *The Art of Thinking*

Alvin Plantinga's response provides a welcome opportunity to explore more deeply the issues raised by his critique of the historical argument in *Warranted Christian Belief (WCB)*.¹ Between his gracious opening remarks and his closing line he starts so many hares that one could easily spend a hundred pages trying to chase them all down. Forced to be selective, we will focus our attention on five of them.

Historical Argument? What Historical Argument?

One of the complaints that frames Plantinga's reply is that he has been put in a false position. There is, he protests, no such thing as *the* historical argument, because there are *many* historical arguments; and it is unfair—"naughty, or at least tendentious"—to ask whether he has refuted the historical argument. "No such general refutation," he says, "was proposed or

¹ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 268–80. The critique to which Plantinga is here responding is Timothy McGrew, "Has Plantinga Refuted the Historical Argument," *Philosophia Christi* 6 (2004): 7–26.

envisaged,” and he would be delighted to discover that there are powerful arguments for Christian belief.²

This is a welcome retreat to an irenic pluralism about the possible grounds of Christian belief, and we appreciate Plantinga’s willingness to let a thousand flowers bloom. But it *is* a retreat. In *WCB* we find repeated sweeping negative claims about the historical case that can sensibly be interpreted only in a much stronger sense than Plantinga is now comfortable maintaining.

Because Plantinga stresses this point, and because the justice of his complaints about “misunderstandings, serious exaggerations, and untoward rhetoric”³ depends in large measure on what he actually says in *WCB*, it is worth quoting from that work at some length. When he sets out to tell us why what he calls “the testimonial model” is necessary, he does not begin with some particular version of the historical case but rather sketches with a few deft strokes the barest outline of the shape that such a case would take: God could have revealed the great truths of the gospel directly only to certain human beings, who could write them down for the benefit of the rest of us; and we in turn could then see “in the ordinary way” that they are both true and to be believed.⁴ For the next few pages he finesses the theological backdrop to such a claim until he arrives at a more sophisticated formulation of the general strategy. The language he employs at this point is important.

Still (comes the reply), can’t we discover for ourselves, without any special divine aid or assistance, that the Bible (the New Testament, say) is in fact “from God”: divinely inspired in such a way that God speaks to us in it and through it, and hence wholly reliable? Can’t we come to see this in the same way that we can learn that Herodotus and Xenophon are reasonably reliable reporters of what they hear and see? And once we see that, couldn’t we then infer that the Bible’s central message of incarnation and atonement is true? Can’t we see and appreciate the historical case for the truth of the main lines of Christian belief without any special work of the Holy Spirit? “You must be born again” all right—your affections, aims, and intentions must be recalibrated, redirected, reversed—and that requires special divine help. But *given* that recalibration, couldn’t you *then* see and appreciate the historical case for the truth of the main lines of Christianity without any special work of the Holy Spirit?

I don’t think so. Even discounting the effects of sin on our apprehension of the historical case, that case isn’t strong enough to produce warranted belief that the main lines of Christian teaching are true—at

² Alvin Plantinga, “Historical Arguments and Dwindling Probabilities: A Response to Timothy McGrew,” *Philosophia Christi* 8 (2006): 12, 21.

³ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 268.

most, it could produce the warranted belief that the main lines of Christian teaching aren't particularly improbable.⁵

If there is a subtle semantic distinction between “the historical case” and “the historical argument,” we confess that we are unable to see what it is or how it might reconcile Plantinga’s strong language in *WCB* with his subsequent retreat to pluralism. This language cannot be written off as an infelicitous choice of words without making nonsense of the passage. If there is no such thing as the historical argument, what “case” did he think isn’t strong enough to produce warranted belief?

It cannot be just Richard Swinburne’s version of the historical argument. Only after all of this stage setting, and only after tipping his hand broadly regarding the merits of a historical approach, does he ask how such a case might go—a question that is intelligible only if he has, up to that point, been using the phrase “the historical case” in a generic sense. We must read a page further along before he begins to introduce the probabilistic structure of Swinburne’s argument that will lead in the fullness of time to his invocation of the “principle of dwindling probabilities.”

Nor does he restrict himself to rendering judgment on Swinburne’s version. Having applied the principle of dwindling probabilities, he envisages some discomfort on the part of readers who may “quibble with the specific values” he proposes, but he stresses that they cannot quibble their way off the hook: “I tried to err on the side of generosity; and even if we assigned somewhat higher probabilities, the result won’t change much.”⁶ He does not suggest that discomfited readers might avoid his conclusion by construing the historical case altogether differently. And any lingering doubts that this might have been an oversight evaporate as he wraps up the critique, for he issues a verdict not on some particular version of the historical argument, much less an idiosyncratic or unrepresentative one, but on the infirmities of the historical evidence in general.

The conclusion to be drawn, I think, is that K, our background knowledge, historical and otherwise (excluding what we know by way of faith or revelation), isn’t anywhere nearly sufficient to support serious belief in G [the great truths of the gospel]. If K were all we had to go on, the only sensible course would be agnosticism: “I don’t know whether G is true or not: all I can say for sure is that it is not terribly unlikely.”⁷

⁵ Ibid., 271.

⁶ Ibid., 280.

⁷ Ibid. For evidence that readers sympathetic to Plantinga’s perspective have viewed his argument based on the PDP, which circulated prior to the publication of *WCB*, as having wider negative consequences than the mere refutation of Swinburne’s argument, see Jan Cover, “Miracles and Christian Theism,” in *Reason for the Hope Within*, ed. Michael Murray (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), particularly 370n15.

The most charitable interpretation we can put upon these passages is that Plantinga believed, at the time that he was writing *WCB*, that any historical case worth taking seriously would be structurally similar to the argument he attributed to Swinburne. Having (as he thought) demolished Swinburne's argument through a critique of its structure, he felt entitled to make sweeping claims about "the historical case." If those claims now strike him as insupportable, it would perhaps be more prudent simply to withdraw them than to blame others for attributing them to him in the first place.

Will the Real Anti-evidentialist Please Stand Up?

Plantinga also protests that anti-evidentialism "doesn't entail or even suggest that in fact there *aren't* good arguments either for theism or for the great things of the gospel." Though he doesn't think arguments are terribly important in this area, since in his opinion we don't need them for reasonable belief, he claims that he would be delighted to discover that there are powerful arguments for Christian belief, just as there are for theism. This, he says, is his "basic approach to the epistemology of religious belief."⁸

Is it really true, as Plantinga claims, that this "throws no doubt at all on anti-evidentialism"?⁹ That depends, of course, on what one means by "anti-evidentialism." Here, he restricts the position to the claim that evidence, in the old-fashioned sense, is not *necessary* for reasonable theistic and Christian belief. If this is all he wants to say, then of course the discussion of the historical argument is another topic altogether.¹⁰ Plantinga must be allowed the final word on whether derogation of the historical evidence for Christianity is at the heart of his position or is merely a peripheral interest.

But this is again a retreat from the bolder rhetoric of *WCB*. The connection between the fortunes of the historical approach and the need for the testimonial model—and the latter is surely of some importance to his epistemology of religious belief if not at its absolute core—is not of our making. Plantinga himself touts the failure of the historical approach as a reason that we must accept something like his testimonial model. Anticipating some incredulity regarding the need for that model, he writes:

Why is this elaborate scheme necessary? . . . [W]hat might recommend this particular scheme? Wouldn't some less extravagant means suffice? Couldn't this information come to us just as well by way of ordinary *human* testimony, for example? Perhaps (as Locke thought) God could have revealed the great truths of the gospel in some direct

⁸ Plantinga, "Historical Arguments and Dwindling Probabilities," 21.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Which is not to say that we agree with anti-evidentialism even in this minimal sense, which we do not.

way only to certain human beings. They could then write them down for the benefit of the rest of us, who are then supposed to be able to see in the ordinary way that these writings do, indeed, constitute divine revelation (and are accordingly both true and to be believed). Why have any truck with special faculties or supernatural belief-producing processes like faith and the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit?

. . . [T]he main problem with Locke's appealingly simple device is that it wouldn't work.¹¹

And again, after he has completed his critique, he reiterates the significance of the failure of the evidential approach.

It is for this reason that some such scheme as proposed in the testimonial model is necessary, if we human beings are to be able to know the great truths of the gospel.¹²

To suggest, as Plantinga does now, that the fortunes of the historical argument do not bear upon the reasonableness of his distinctive approach to the epistemology of religious belief—to say that the whole discussion is “not even on the same subject”—seems like an abrupt severing of a connection that he was more than willing to exploit when it appeared to be working in favor of his testimonial model. If what is by Plantinga's own description the main reason for rejecting an evidential approach in favor of the testimonial model turns out to be false, one would assume that we are driven back upon other, lesser reasons. And in that case the argument for the nonevidential approach Plantinga advocates in *WCB*, if not for the restricted claim to which he now wishes to confine the discussion, must surely be somewhat weakened. Perhaps we should simply reopen the issue by asking Plantinga's own questions once again. Why have any truck with special faculties like the *sensus divinitatus* or, in the specific sense in which Plantinga intends it, the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit? Why not be content with Locke's appealingly simple approach?¹³

¹¹ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 268.

¹² *Ibid.*, 280.

¹³ There is an interesting parallel here in epistemology. How many philosophers have adopted externalism over classical foundationalist internalism because they became convinced that there is no argument that would satisfy a classical foundationalist internalist for some pre-theoretically-plausible proposition—e.g., the claim that a stable external world exists? As it has been in epistemology, so (Plantinga assumes in *WCB*) it will be in the debate over evidentialism in the philosophy of religion. Whether or not they are good arguments, counsels of despair can certainly be powerful sociological motivators.

Dwindling Probabilities and Other Red Herrings

When he discusses the question of order of inference in arguments for Christianity, Plantinga attempts once again to explain the structure of Richard Swinburne's argument. Remarkably, he still attributes to Swinburne an argument in which the probabilities of both theism and the resurrection are evaluated against a univocal set comprising all of our background evidence but in which, nonetheless, we must "first" evaluate the probability of theism on total evidence.

The very passage Plantinga quotes from Swinburne on page 8 tells decisively against this reading. Swinburne refers to one's having "other evidence" for theism and to the way in which that might affect the need for historical evidence for the resurrection. Plainly, he is talking about evaluating the prior probability for theism on evidence other than the historical evidence for the resurrection. This prior will, in turn, affect the prior probability for the resurrection. Both will then be updated in a Bayesian fashion on the added historical evidence, however much or little of that there may be. Swinburne has been quite explicit about this matter, and in his recent response to Plantinga he states expressly that the background K on which he intended that theism initially be evaluated represents "the evidence of natural theology" *rather than* total evidence.¹⁴

Apropos of Swinburne's discussion of the probability of theism on "other evidence," Plantinga remarks in a footnote that "This reason for first determining the value of $P(T|K)$ suggests a *synchronic* interpretation of the argument, at least for this initial step."¹⁵ Now the phrase "a synchronic interpretation . . . for this initial step" is very puzzling indeed, the more so as Plantinga acknowledges in the third section that Swinburne is making a multistaged argument in which evidence is added at each stage. Had this note appeared in the third section we might have been entitled to read it as an attempt to explain Plantinga's previous misunderstanding of Swinburne's argument. In context, however, Plantinga appears to be trying to say something of epistemic relevance independent of Swinburnian hermeneutics, something having to do with the probability of theism, the probability of the resurrection, total evidence, and the Theorem on Total Probability.¹⁶ But it is

¹⁴ See Richard Swinburne, "Natural Theology, Its 'Dwindling Probabilities' and 'Lack of Rapport,'" *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (2004): 541–2. See also *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 30–1. Swinburne has emphasized this point repeatedly, both in public at the SCP Western Division meeting (Biola University, February, 2004) and in personal communication with us and with Plantinga. Plantinga notes Swinburne's comments in his third section.

¹⁵ Plantinga, "Historical Arguments and Dwindling Probabilities," 14n20. The emphasis is Plantinga's.

¹⁶ Note the many ways the present tense is used in this passage: "I am evaluating Swinburne's argument, and that's how he does it." Plantinga says he is explaining why

unclear what his point could be. If one evaluates the probabilities on total evidence at the outset, there will be no other stages at which relevant evidence is added. It makes no sense to talk about the evaluation of the probability of theism on the *total* evidence as the “initial step” in an argument where more evidence relevant to theism will be added later.

This entire section would make sense if only Plantinga were talking about the *prior* probability for both theism and the resurrection—their probability, that is, on some background K^- that does not include the historical evidence for the resurrection. In that case, he could say that a low prior probability for theism will make for a low prior probability for the resurrection and that an evaluation of the prior probability for theism helps us to see how steep of a slope, as it were, the specific, historical evidence for the resurrection needs to climb. But since Plantinga insists upon using a background K that is supposed to represent *total* evidence—an insistence underscored by his remarks in footnote 20—this interpretation is not open to us, and in consequence the entire section is puzzling in the extreme. It makes no sense to say that we can find out how much historical evidence is required for belief in the resurrection by finding out first the probability of theism on all evidence—including, one is forced to assume, the historical evidence for the resurrection. If the historical evidence for the resurrection is relevant to theism by way of its relevance to the resurrection, we must take it into account in order to find the probability of theism on *all* evidence in the first place. And in that case, we have already taken both that evidence and its impact on the resurrection into account and cannot be trying to find out how much of it we need for evaluating the probability of the resurrection.

No one denies that at each separate stage of a multistage argument one’s probabilities must be synchronically coherent. Nor do we deny that the prior probability of theism is epistemically related to the prior probability of the resurrection. But that does not mean that it is hermeneutically correct or epistemically helpful to think of a staged argument as beginning at the “initial step” with an evaluation of probabilities based on total evidence. It is hard not to conclude from these pages and this footnote that Plantinga, his acknowledgements in the third section notwithstanding, is still somewhat confused about what is meant by a staged argument using Bayesian updating. And it is more than strange that, having chosen for his representative of the historical argument Richard Swinburne, the foremost living exponent of the use of Bayes’s Theorem in the philosophy of religion, Plantinga should repeatedly refuse to use Bayes’s Theorem when attempting to represent

Swinburne “does” first argue for a reasonably high probability for theism, and he talks about what one “must” do in order to evaluate the probability of the resurrection on total evidence. There is no implication that this is merely what Plantinga used to think Swinburne’s argument was like. Rather, Plantinga clearly takes himself to be explaining something that remains pertinent after his misunderstanding of Swinburne has been cleared up.

Swinburne's argument and should resort, again and again, to successive multiplications in the Theorem on Total Probability.¹⁷

Although Plantinga concedes that he cannot see clearly how his "Principle of Dwindling Probabilities" (hereafter PDP) will at any point be illuminating to the argument for theism or for Christianity, he holds out the possibility that perhaps when all evidence is considered it will once more come into play.¹⁸ But the irrelevance of the PDP is not simply a result of making the historical argument in stages. It is also a function of the evidential relevance of the resurrection to mere theism. And this relevance remains in the final, synchronic state where all evidence is taken into account.

The procedure used to apply the PDP goes roughly like this: Find some proposition A that is positively relevant to some other proposition B but that is strictly weaker than B—that is, B entails A but not *vice versa*. Note that, on some plausible background evidence, A will be more probable than B and that P(A) will set an upper bound on P(B). Estimate, off the cuff, a probability for A, trying in some vague fashion to be generous in this estimate. Construct an argument from A to B involving, perhaps, the introduction of other premises. Apply the theorem on total probability to show that the lower bound of a probability interval for B can end up much, much lower than the original "generous" estimate for A, especially if several other propositions are involved and the probability of B on the negations of those other propositions is zero or very low. Point out triumphantly that, once one has made a "generous" estimate of A's probability, it is all downhill from there.

This procedure is almost bound to mislead wildly when the logically stronger claim serves as a channel of significant evidence for the weaker one. The following pair of claims illustrates this point:

A: Alvin Plantinga exists

B: Alvin Plantinga called me on the telephone last night

Obviously, any direct evidence (memories, tape recordings) for B is importantly relevant to A. It would be a serious mistake casually to estimate the probability of A *without* explicit consideration of the evidence for B and then to treat that estimate as an upper bound on the probability of B on total evidence. A similar relation holds between the two claims under consideration here:

¹⁷ Plantinga claims that Swinburne places theism below the resurrection in the probability lattice. Yet it was made plain in "Has Plantinga Refuted the Historical Argument?" that the probability lattice represents merely the coherent coordination of synchronic probabilities. It cannot represent a diachronic, staged argument and does not even (for that matter) represent synchronic inferential relations. Hence, Swinburne's staged argument has nothing to do with placing theism "below the resurrection" in the probability lattice.

¹⁸ Plantinga, "Historical Arguments and Dwindling Probabilities," 17.

A': God exists

B': God raised Jesus from the dead

While we freely grant that A' is, considered against the same ordinary background evidence, less probable than B', neither this comparative statement nor an ascription of a modest prior to A' sets a bound on the probabilities of either claim when all evidence is taken into account. If one's initial estimate of the probability of theism on *all* of the relevant evidence is really to be generous, or even rational, it must take into account *inter alia* that portion of the background evidence that supports mere theism by way of its direct support for more specifically Christian claims such as the resurrection. But in that case the structural and rhetorical trope whereby one mentally sets aside the historical evidence for the resurrection when estimating the probability of theism is nearly guaranteed to yield a value different from the actual probability on total evidence; and in Plantinga's deployment of the PDP, even corrected to include other nonzero path probabilities, there is no subsequent stage in which the missing historical evidence can be taken into account by conditionalization.¹⁹ This is why it is hopeless to use the PDP as Plantinga does in evaluating any complex argument. The only clear-eyed way to proceed when one is contemplating two mutually relevant propositions like A' and B' is to examine in as much detail as possible the evidence pertinent, directly or indirectly, to each of them.²⁰

Amateurs, Experts, and Estimates

In *WCB* Plantinga, noting that experts disagree about the historicity of the resurrection, concludes on that basis that we probably "should" declare the probability of the resurrection inscrutable.²¹ Then, apparently in the name of generosity, he gives the resurrection a probability interval between .6 and .8. "Even if you had a fine command of the vast literature and thought there was rather a good historical case here," he writes, "you would presumably think it pretty speculative and chancy."²²

Taxed with the fact that in this entire discussion he made not the most minimal attempt to engage with the actual historical evidence for the resur-

¹⁹ We note in passing that Plantinga's contention on page 11 that $P(E|K \& A \& B \& C \& \sim D)$ has an inscrutable lower bound does not seem to be the outcome of any compelling argument.

²⁰ Readers may wonder whether there will be something circular going on in such a case, given the evidential relevance of mere theism to the resurrection. Can a foundationalist in any sense infer the resurrection from theism and theism from the resurrection at the same time? But structural foundationalism does not preclude synchronic mutual positive relevance when the two propositions involved are serving as channels to one another for the force of independent evidence.

²¹ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 276.

²² *Ibid.*

rection, Plantinga now falls back upon his amateur status, implying that he cannot be expected to engage the historical case at all unless he returns to graduate school. He offers, belatedly and with an apologetic gesture, some kind words for F. F. Bruce, William Lane Craig, Stephen T. Davis, Gary Habermas, and N. T. Wright, saying that he “didn’t mean for a moment to denigrate their excellent work” and that they “have produced serious and sometimes impressive historical arguments”—praise that would be even more valuable had he not insisted in the pages of this journal that he does not know any good arguments from public evidence for the truth of Christianity.²³ These serious and impressive arguments notwithstanding, he declares his preference for the highly pessimistic judgment of John Meier—over, one must infer, that of Wright and the other more optimistic contemporary experts whose work he praises.²⁴

Plantinga’s choice of Meier as an expert on the historical evidence for the resurrection is particularly unfortunate. In a revealing interview conducted just after the publication of his multivolume work *A Marginal Jew*, Meier states most emphatically that he does not regard historical evidence as *relevant* to the question of the resurrection.

I myself along with most questers for the historical Jesus—and I think a fair number of Catholic theologians as well—would say the Resurrection stands outside of the sort of questing by way of historical, critical research that is done for the life of the historical Jesus, because of the nature of the Resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus is certainly supremely real. However, not everything that is real either exists in time and space or is empirically verifiable by historical means. . . .

The true Jesus who had died rose in the fullness of his humanity into the full presence of God. That is, I think, the essence of belief in the Resurrection. What the relationship of that risen body is to the body that was laid in the tomb is first of all not something that is historically verifiable. It is not subject to historical research at all.²⁵

²³ Alvin Plantinga, “Internalism, Externalism, Defeaters and Arguments for Christian Belief,” *Philosophia Christi* 3 (2001): 398.

²⁴ Plantinga, “Historical Arguments and Dwindling Probabilities,” 19. Plantinga also makes some deprecatory remarks about Dr. Johnson’s command of the literature, by which perhaps he means to indicate that the literature he has in mind didn’t exist in Johnson’s time. One hopes he means no more than that. It would be ludicrous to suggest that Johnson was unaware of the vast literature of the deist controversy, including the objections of Spinoza and Hume and the work of Grotius, Abbadie, Butler, Lardner, and Leland. We note in passing that Plantinga’s derogatory reference to Johnson’s celebrated refutation of Berkeley comes oddly from someone who stresses the epistemic excellence of unargued beliefs arrived at through the proper functioning of one’s faculties in the appropriate environment.

²⁵ John Bookser Feister, “Finding the Historical Jesus,” interview with John Meier, *St. Anthony Messenger*, December 1997, <http://www.americancatholic.org/Messenger/Dec1997/feature3.asp> (accessed October 16, 2005).

It is disappointing to find that even Plantinga's designated specialist is, at the crucial point, unwilling to engage directly with the historical evidence.

In any event, Plantinga cannot lean so heavily on his amateur status if he wishes to have his estimate accepted as plausibly relevant. He gives us no idea as to why he sides with Meier rather than with other experts. If one really is a *total* amateur on some subject, this may not be wholly illegitimate. If you know nothing at all about cars, you may choose to rely on the opinion of a mechanic who disagrees with other equally or better credentialed mechanics because, say, you like his face or think he sounds intelligent, or because he is the only expert you have consulted. After all, if you are utterly ignorant, little is lost by your adopting someone else's views. But if that is really all you have to go on, your personal probability bears no significant relation to the publicly available evidence about the merits of this car. And it would be a pretty cheeky move to legislate from this standpoint what others *ought* to think about it—or, what comes to much the same thing, to say what they presumably would think about it if they did their homework.

But his plea of amateur status notwithstanding, Plantinga undertakes in *WCB* to tell us what someone thoroughly conversant with the relevant literature would say about the strength of the publicly available historical case for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is hard to see how his estimate could represent *this* credibility anyway, since, as he himself stresses, the people who do know a lot about the literature differ sharply in their judgments.²⁶ What his proffered probability interval actually represents is what someone would say who declines to discuss the positive literature on the subject even briefly, who claims to know so little about the matter as to be unable to make any judgment on it for himself, who chooses for unspecified reasons to rely on one expert in contradistinction to others—but who, lest his estimate should be thought ungenerous, has tossed in a handful of points over the fifty percent mark. This tells us nothing of interest. Only by the sheerest accident could the considered and the casual probability come to the same thing.

Plantinga's protest that he would have to go back to graduate school to form an educated layman's opinion on the matter is also unconvincing. It does not require mastery of any heavy technical apparatus to read works by advocates and critics of the historical case and to formulate a reasoned judgment as to who has the better of the argument.²⁷ Perhaps Plantinga has done some of this reading but prefers not to get into the matter in print. That is his

²⁶ In fact, it could plausibly be argued from the sheer magnitude of these disagreements that the probability on the whole of the publicly available evidence is unlikely to lie in the middle—that someone or other is deeply biased or badly confused.

²⁷ Plantinga's animadversions against Troeltschians notwithstanding, he does not seem to appreciate how frequently objections to the evidential approach, even among writers whose orthodoxy is in other respects unimpeachable, hinge on philosophical objections to the miraculous drawn from Hume. There is substantial documentation for this in Joseph Houston's excel-

prerogative. But he cannot have it both ways. If he is going to address the matter at all, it will not do to trip delicately along at the level of second-order discourse, mentioning only the sociological fact of expert disagreement—not on a matter of this much urgency, not from one of the foremost Christian philosophers of our time, and especially not as the sole basis for his public estimate of the strength of the historical evidence.

Speaking of Evidence

The nearest Plantinga comes to an actual discussion of the historical evidence is when, in his response, he expresses doubt about the considerations advanced by many evidentialists in favor of the truth of the Christian religion. In particular, he takes issue with the suggestion that, where

θ = The apostles were willing to die as martyrs

γ = The apostles knew their message was true,

the likelihood ratio

$$\frac{P(\theta|K\&\gamma)}{P(\theta|K\&\sim\gamma)}$$

must be top-heavy in the extreme—that it is far more probable, given our background knowledge, that the apostles would be willing to die as martyrs given that they knew their message was true than that they would thus die given that they did not know that their message was true. Plantinga counters, first, that K contains already the proposition that the disciples, who devoted their lives to spreading the gospel, *very firmly believed* that their message was true—which he glosses by saying that they had belief “to degree *d*,” where *d* is somewhere close to 1. But *pace* Plantinga, the proposition that the apostles had *that* high a degree of belief is not part of K. It is one thing to devote one’s time, even one’s life, to a cause, particularly if one believes that it is a good cause and that one is bettering the lives of one’s fellow men. It is another to be willing to die a grisly death for the truth of an empirical claim. Among the labors, dangers and sufferings endured by the early Christians, martyrdom is unique and has, from an evidential point of view, the greatest force. Even taking into consideration the lives they had lived, their willingness to die in attestation of the fact of the resurrection was not a foregone conclusion.

lent book *Reported Miracles: A Critique of Hume* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) and William Lane Craig’s essay “The Problem of Miracles: A Historical and Philosophical Perspective,” in *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 6, *The Miracles of Jesus*, ed. David Wenham and Craig Blomberg (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986), 9–48.

Plantinga also contends that we need not hypothesize that the apostles *knew* that their message was true.²⁸ In particular, he implies that the T component of knowledge is doing no explanatory work, that their actions are just as well explained by very strong belief in a falsehood. But this suggestion is also unconvincing. If the apostles' belief that Christ was raised from the dead was false, either they had good reasons to believe it or they did not. Suppose that they did not; would their willingness to endure martyrdom still be probable under this condition? Plantinga assumes that attributing to an individual a very high subjective probability, or degree of belief, is always a good explanation for his actions. But surely it is not in general true that subjective enthusiasm and considered judgment are equally robust causes. A gambler in a fit of frenzy may offer hundred-to-one odds that the roulette wheel will come up red on the next spin; a trained surgeon might offer similar odds that a certain procedure will cure his patient. But the gambler is apt to sober up quickly and abandon his enthusiasm if his child's life is put on the line, whereas the surgeon may well proceed even if the patient is his daughter. The manner in which a strong belief is held, in particular the role of evidence in its formation and maintenance, often makes a difference to its value as an explanation for subsequent action. The theory that the apostles believed strongly that Christ rose from the dead but lacked good reasons for that belief has poor likelihood with respect to θ .

Suppose, on the other hand, that they did have good reasons for their belief in the resurrection but were nevertheless mistaken. How is this supposed to have come about? Hypotheses devised to satisfy this alternative, such as the hallucination and swoon theories, are notoriously implausible; their prior probability is very low. A clever stage magician or a smooth-tongued salesman may induce (for the time being) a state of belief in the dematerialization of a coin or the mechanical excellence and modest price of an automobile. But what has that to do with this case? The historical point at issue has nothing to do with vanishing coins or used cars; the apostles' belief was not induced in the blink of an eye under suboptimal perceptual conditions, nor did it pertain to some matter inaccessible to their direct examination. The apostles endured martyrdom in attestation of the empirical claim that they were eyewitnesses, across forty days of direct contact, of a resurrected man whom they had seen brutally executed but who subsequently showed himself alive by "many infallible proofs." Exactly how firm belief in *this* claim was supposed to be induced if it was false is something Plantinga wisely refrains from explaining.

Certainly he cannot do it by invoking the examples of kamikaze pilots, Nazi soldiers, or suicide bombers. Plantinga stresses that he does not mean to compare these people to the apostles in any respect other than the fact that

²⁸ In raising this issue, Plantinga is (perhaps consciously) following up on a question raised by William Lane Craig. See "Has Plantinga Refuted the Historical Argument?" 22n31.

they were willing to give their lives for what they believed was true. But the analogy between these people and the apostles breaks down at just the points where the historical argument shows its strength. It is clear that neither kamikazes, Nazis, nor suicide bombers died to affirm the reality of something that they had seen with their eyes and their hands had handled. Thus, their deaths and the falsehood of some of their beliefs tell us little or nothing about the probability that a man will die to make an affirmation *like that of the apostles* when it is in fact false. The educational resources of an entire nation, applied over the course of a decade or more to minds at their most impressionable stage, may be sufficient to induce in the young the general belief that their country or their religion is worth dying for. But what would induce grown men to break with the religious community in which they had been raised and to confess with their blood that they had seen a dead man raised to life?

Plantinga does briefly discuss prior probabilities when he examines the ratio of the prior probabilities,

$$\frac{P(\gamma|K)}{P(\sim\gamma|K)},$$

arguing that this ratio is bottom-heavy if, like Dr. Johnson, one places “little stock” in traditional theistic proofs. For the apostles could not know that their message was true unless it was true. If our background knowledge *K* (apart from the historical evidence) does not provide strong evidence for the existence of God, it cannot provide strong evidence for the truth of Christianity, and *a fortiori* it cannot provide strong evidence that the apostles knew its truth. Plantinga concludes that “the probability of *T* [theism] on prior evidence minus the evidence appealed to in those traditional arguments will be fairly close to the probability of *T* on prior evidence. But then I should think that [this ratio] would be seriously bottom-heavy.”²⁹

This line of reasoning rests on a very narrow reading of what it means to “place stock” in the traditional theistic proofs. The attitude attributed to Johnson was certainly not meant to imply that the probability of theism absent the historical evidence for the resurrection is low, still less that it is very low, still less that it is, as Plantinga suggests, so low as to cross-cancel any benefit from the likelihood ratio for the martyrs’ deaths. For one thing, the historical evidence for the resurrection and the traditional theistic proofs are not the only categories that need to be considered. The Judeo-Christian view is that God had already, before the coming of Christ, revealed himself directly by way of His dealings with the Jewish people. Their history and documents need to be considered for evidential value, as do the many prophecies fulfilled by Christ’s life and death. Moreover, it is quite consistent with placing “little stock” in the theistic proofs merely to say that they

²⁹ Plantinga, “Historical Arguments and Dwindling Probabilities,” 16.

are not sufficient by themselves to support serious belief in theism, a statement far weaker than the claim that they make scarcely any difference at all to the probability of theism.

It is of course *possible*, given only general considerations, that when all is said and done the priors and the likelihoods will cross-cancel. And it is possible that they will not. General considerations tell us almost nothing here, as Arnauld notes in the Port-Royal *Logic*; they are no substitute for the examination of particular circumstances.³⁰ This is the insight that lies behind the vast literature, ancient and modern, devoted to a meticulous analysis of the historical evidence. Our allusions to the weight we would be inclined to place on various portions of the case and our brief discussion of martyrdom and likelihoods are no substitute for such detailed arguments. But *a fortiori*, Plantinga's references to kamikaze pilots and his casual and entirely unsupported assertion that the "ratio of the posterior probabilities, one thinks, won't be far from 1" are no substitute for a response to them.³¹

In sum, Plantinga's contention that the likelihood ratio on page 15 is not top-heavy arises from his failure to consider the specific nature of the claim in question and the circumstances in which the apostles were induced to believe it. His argument to the contrary depends on a dubious assumption about the explanatory efficacy of high subjective probability, on a misapprehension regarding the evidence in our background knowledge apart from θ , on a failure to appreciate the implausibility in this specific case of strong belief in a falsehood, and on the invocation of cases that are disanalogous to that of the martyred apostles at the critical points. And his contention that, on the view he guesses we would advocate, the prior probability of theism and of the resurrection will be so low as to cancel the value of the historical evidence for the resurrection rests on a misunderstanding of what it means to place little stock in traditional theistic proofs.

Plantinga's rhetoric is, in at least some parts of this response, more conciliatory than it was in *WCB*. He forswears any intention of refuting the historical argument for Christianity and indeed declares that he would be delighted if it could be so defended. He acknowledges in print for perhaps the first time the significance of the contributions of several living proponents of the historical case, and his negative claims about the strength of that case are somewhat tempered. Each of these changes is a welcome development in Plantinga's thought.

But although his posture has become more irenic, two key aspects of Plantinga's position remain largely unchanged. He continues to suggest that the PDP may somehow undermine the evidentialist's approach. And he con-

³⁰ Antoine Arnauld, *The Art of Thinking*, trans. James Dickoff and Patricia James (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), 350. See the epigraph for this paper. Arnauld's advice is arguably better than his practice. It is the advice we are urging here.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

tinues to imply that the historical case for Christianity is not very strong, though he provides no cogent reasons to believe anything of the kind. As one might have expected in the nature of the case, analyses that do not engage directly with the evidence leave the historical question whether Jesus rose from the dead on the third day very much open. Purely philosophical discussion is at best a prolegomenon to the fair, full, and impartial investigation that the subject deserves.³²

³² We are grateful to Trent Dougherty, Alvin Plantinga, and Richard Swinburne for helpful correspondence on these matters.