

**Without Evidence or Argument:
A Defense of Reformed Epistemology**
Dr. Kelly James Clark

Dr. Kelly James Clark, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Calvin College, earned his doctorate at University of Notre Dame where he studied with Alvin Plantinga, the most prominent defender of Reformed epistemology. Dr. Clark is author of numerous books and articles in the philosophy of religion and epistemology including When Faith Is Not Enough, Philosophers Who Believe and Return to Reason (a defense of Reformed Epistemology).

Suppose a stranger, let's call him David, sends you a note that declares that your wife is cheating on you. No pictures are included, no dates or times, no names. Just the assertion of your wife's unfaithfulness. You have had already fifteen good, and so far as you know, faithful years with your wife. Her behavior hasn't changed dramatically in the past few years. Except for David's allegation, you have no reason to believe there has been a breach in the relationship. What should you do? Confront her with what you take to be the truth, straight from David's letter? Hire a detective to follow her for a week and hope against hope the letter is a hoax? Or do you simply remain secure in the trust that you have built up all those years?

Suppose, even worse, that your son Clifford comes home after taking his first philosophy course in college. He persuades you of the truth of the so-called "problem of other minds." How do you know that other minds and, therefore, other people exist? How do you know that people are not simply cleverly constructed robots with excellent makeup jobs? How do you know that behind the person facade lies a person -- someone with thoughts, desires and feelings? You can't experience another person's

feelings; you can't see another person's thoughts (even if you cut off the top of their head and peered into their brain); and even Bill Clinton can't really feel another person's pain. Yet thoughts, desires, and feelings are all essential to being a person. So you can't tell from the outside or just by looking, so to speak, if someone is a person. I can know that I am a person because I experience my own thoughts, feelings and desires. But I can't know, because I don't have any access to your inner-experience, if you, or anyone else, is a person.

Since you can't know if anyone else is a person, you rightly infer that you can't know if your wife is a person. Unsure that your wife is a person, how do you treat her? Do you hire a philosophical detective to search the philosophical literature for a proof that people-like things really are people? Do you avoid cuddling in the meantime, given your aversion to snuggling with machines? Or do you simply trust your deep-seated conviction that, in spite of the lack of evidence, your wife is a person and deserves to be treated as such?

Two final "Supposes." Suppose that you come to believe that there is a God because your parents taught you from the cradle up that God exists. Or suppose that you are on a retreat or on the top of a mountain and have a sense of being loved by God or that God created the universe. You begin to believe in God, not because you are persuaded by the argument from design -- you are simply taken with belief in God. You just find yourself believing, what you had heretofore denied, that God exists. Now you have come across the writings of David Hume and W. K. Clifford who insist that you base all of your beliefs on evidence. Hume raises a further point: your belief in an

all-loving, omnipotent God is inconsistent with the evil that there is in the world. Given the fact of evil, God cannot exist. To meet this demand for evidence, do you become a temporary agnostic and begin perusing the texts of Aquinas, Augustine and Paley for a good proof of God's existence? Do you give up belief in God because you see Hume's point and can't see how God and evil could be reconciled? Or do you remain steady in your trust in God in spite of the lack of evidence and even in the face of counter-evidence?

My Suppose-This and Suppose-That Stories are intended to raise the problem of the relationship of our important beliefs to evidence (and counter-evidence). Since the Enlightenment, there has been a demand to expose all of our beliefs to the searching criticism of reason. If a belief is unsupported by the evidence, it is irrational to believe it. It is the position of Reformed epistemology (likely the position that Calvin held) that belief in God, like belief in other persons, does not require the support of evidence or argument in order for it to be rational. This view has been defended by some of the world's most prominent philosophers including Alvin Plantinga, leader of the recent revival in Christian philosophy. Plantinga was Reformed epistemology's first contemporary defender and his home institution, Calvin College, supported the research of other prominent philosophers in its development, including Nicholas Wolterstorff, William Alston and George Mavrodes.¹ The first fruits of their labors was the jointly published Faith and Rationality² which, in turn, produced an entire industry of defenses of religious belief. Important and influential works were published on religious experience, revelation, Christian belief, epistemology and the problem of evil.

The renaissance of Christian philosophy owes a great debt to the intellectual power and fertility of Reformed epistemology.

The claim that belief in God is rational without the support of evidence or argument is startling for many an atheist or theist. Most atheist intellectuals feel comfort in their disbelief in God because they judge that there is little or no evidence for God's existence. Many theistic thinkers, however, in particular Roman Catholics and some recent Protestant evangelicals, insist that belief in God requires evidence and that such a demand should and can be met. So the claim that a person does not need evidence in order to rationally believe in God runs against the grain for atheist thinkers and has raised the ire of many theists. In spite of the vitriolic response to Reformed epistemology, I believe it is eminently defensible. In order to defend it, let us examine its critique of the enlightenment demand for evidence.

The Demand for Evidence

W. K. Clifford, in an oft-cited article, claims that it is wrong, always and everywhere, for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence. Such a strong claim makes one speculate on Clifford's childhood: one imagines young W. K. constantly pestering his parents with "Why? Why? Why?...." It is this childish attitude toward inquiry and the risks that belief requires that leads William James to chastise Clifford as an *enfant terrible*. But, rather than disparage his character, let's examine the deficiencies of his claim that everything must be believed only on the basis of sufficient evidence (relevance: If everything must be based on sufficient evidence, so must belief in God).

The first problem with Clifford's universal demand for evidence is that it cannot meet its own demand. Clifford offers two fetching examples (a shipowner who knowingly sends an unseaworthy ship to sea and, in the first example, it sinks and, in the second example, it makes the trip) in support of his claim. The examples powerfully demonstrate that in cases like the example, rational belief requires evidence. No one would disagree: some beliefs require evidence for their rational acceptability. But all beliefs in every circumstance? That's an exceedingly strong claim to make and, it turns out, one that cannot be based on evidence.

Consider what someone like Clifford might allow us to take for evidence: beliefs that we acquire through sensory experience and beliefs that are self-evident like logic and mathematics. Next rainy day, make a list of all of your experiential beliefs: The sky is blue, grass is green, most trees are taller than most grasshoppers, slugs leave a slimy trail..... Now add to this list all of your logical and mathematical beliefs: $2 + 2 = 4$, every proposition is either true or false, all of the even numbers that I know of are the sum of two prime numbers, in Eudiclean geometry the interior angles of triangles equal 180° . From these propositions, try to deduce the conclusion that it is wrong, always and everywhere, for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence. None of the propositions that are allowed as evidence have anything at all to do with the conclusion. So Clifford's universal demand for evidence cannot satisfy its own standard! Therefore, by Clifford's own criterion, it must be irrational. More likely, however, the demand is simply false and it is easy to see why.

We, finite beings that we are, simply cannot meet such a demand. Consider all of the beliefs that you currently hold. How many of those have met Clifford's strict demand for evidence? Clifford intends for all of us, like a scientist in a laboratory, to test all of our beliefs all of the time. Could your beliefs survive Clifford's test? Think of how many of your beliefs, even scientific ones, are acquired just because someone told you. Not having been to Paraguay, I only have testimonial evidence that Paraguay is a country in South America. For all I know, all of the mapmakers have conspired to delude us about the existence of Paraguay (and even South America!). And, since I have been to relatively few countries around the world, I must believe in the existence of most countries (and that other people inhabit them and speak in that language) without support of evidence. I believe that $e=mc^2$ and that matter is made up of tiny little particles not because of experiments in a chemistry or physics lab (for all of my experiments failed) but because my science teachers told me so. Most of the beliefs that I have acquired are based on my trust in my teachers and not on careful consideration of what Clifford would consider adequate evidence. And in this busy day and age, I don't really have the time to live up to Clifford's demand for evidence! If we had the leisure to test all of our beliefs, perhaps we could meet the demand. But since we cannot meet that demand, we cannot be obligated to do so.

Even if we had the time, however, we could not meet this universal demand for evidence. The demand for evidence simply cannot be met in a large number of cases with the cognitive equipment that we have. No one, as mentioned above, has ever been able to prove the existence of other persons. No one has ever been able to prove that we

were not created five minutes ago with our memories intact. No one has been able to prove the reality of the past or that, in the future, the sun will rise. This list could go on and on. There is a limit to the things that human beings can prove. A great deal of what we believe is based on faith, not on evidence or arguments.

I use the term 'faith' here but I think it is misleading. I don't mean to oppose faith to knowledge in these instances. For surely we know that the earth is more than five minutes old and that the sun will rise tomorrow (although, maybe not in cloudy Grand Rapids!) and that Paul converted to Christianity (and lots of other truths about the past), etc., etc., etc. In these cases, we know lots of things but we cannot prove them. We have to trust or rely on the cognitive faculties which produce these beliefs. We rely on our memory to produce memory beliefs (I remember having coffee with my breakfast this morning). We rely on an inductive faculty to produce beliefs about the veracity of natural laws (If I let go of this book, it will fall to the ground). We rely on our cognitive faculties when we believe that there are other persons, there is a past, there is a world independent of our mind, or what other people tell us. We can't help but trust our cognitive faculties.

It is easy to see why. Reasoning must start somewhere. Suppose we were required to offer evidence or arguments for all of our beliefs. If we offer statements 1-4 as evidence for 5, we would have to offer arguments to support 1-4. And then we would have to offer arguments in support of the arguments that are used to support 1-4. And then we would need arguments.....You get the point. Reasoning must start

somewhere. There have to be some truths that we can just accept and reason from. Why not start with belief in God?

Without Evidence or Argument

We have been outfitted with cognitive faculties that produce beliefs that we can reason from. The kinds of beliefs that we do and must reason to is a small subset of the kinds of beliefs that we do and must accept without the aid of a proof. That's the long and short of the human believing condition. We, in most cases, must rely on our God-given intellectual equipment to produce beliefs, without evidence or argument, in the appropriate circumstances. Is it reasonable to believe that God has created us with a cognitive faculty which produces belief in God without evidence or argument?

There are at least three reasons to believe that it is proper or rational for a person to accept belief in God without the need for an argument. First, there are very few people who have access to or the ability to assess most theistic arguments. It is hard to imagine, therefore, that the demand for evidence would be a requirement of reason. My grandmother, a paradigm of the non-philosophical believer, would cackle if I informed her that her belief in God was irrational because she was unable to understand Aquinas's second Way or to refute Hume's version of the argument from evil. The demand for evidence is an imperialistic attempt to make philosophers out of people who have no need to become philosophers. It is curious that very few philosophers (like most ordinary folk) have come to belief in God on the basis of theistic arguments. I commissioned and published a collection of spiritual autobiographies

from prominent Christian philosophers just to see if philosophers were any different from my Grandmother on this count.³ They weren't.

Second, it seems that God has given us an awareness of himself that is not dependent on theistic arguments. It is hard to imagine that God would make rational belief as difficult as those that demand evidence contend. I encourage anyone who thinks that evidence is required for rational belief in God, to study very carefully the theistic arguments, their refutations and counter-refutations, and their increasing subtlety yet decreasing charm. Adequate assessment of these arguments would require a lengthy and tortorous tour through the history of philosophy and may require the honing of one's logical and metaphysical skills beyond the capacity of most of us. Why put that sort of barrier between us and God? John Calvin (as good a Calvinist as any) believed that God had provided us with a sense of the divine. He writes:

'There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity.' This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. Ever renewing its memory, he repeatedly sheds fresh drops....Indeed, the perversity of the impious, who though they struggle furiously are unable to extricate themselves from the fear of God, is abundant testimony that this conviction, namely that there is some God, is naturally inborn in all, and is fixed deep within, as it were in the very marrow. From this we conclude that it is not a doctrine that must first be learned in

school, but one of which each of us is master from his mother's womb and which nature itself permits no one to forget.

Calvin contends that people are accountable to God for their unbelief not because they have failed to submit to a convincing theistic proof, but because they have suppressed the truth that God has implanted within their minds. It is natural to suppose that if God created us with cognitive faculties which by and large reliably produce beliefs without the need for evidence, he would likewise provide us with a cognitive faculty which produces belief in him without the need for evidence.

Third, belief in God is more like belief in a person than belief in a scientific theory. Consider the examples that started this essay. Somehow the scientific approach -- doubt first, consider all of the available evidence, and believe later -- seems woefully inadequate or inappropriate to personal relations. What seems manifestly reasonable for physicists in their laboratory is desperately deficient in human relations. Human relations demand trust, commitment and faith. If belief in God is more like belief in other persons than belief in atoms, then the trust that is appropriate to persons will be appropriate to God. We cannot and should not arbitrarily insist that the scientific method is appropriate to every kind of human practice. The fastidious scientist, who cannot leave the demand for evidence in her laboratory, will find herself cut off from relationships that she could otherwise reasonably maintain -- with friends, family and, even, God.

With or Without Evidence

I haven't said that belief in God could not or, in some cases, should not be based on evidence or argument. Indeed, I am inclined to think that the theistic arguments do provide some, non-coercive, evidence of God's existence. By non-coercive, I mean that the theistic arguments aren't of such power and illumination that they should be expected to persuade all rational creatures. Rational people could rationally reject the theistic proofs. Rational people, and this is a fact that we must live with, rationally disagree. Nonetheless, I believe that someone could rationally believe in God on the basis of theistic arguments but no one needs to.

I also believe, like Calvin, that the natural knowledge of himself that God has implanted within us has been overlaid by sin. Part of the redemptive process will require the removal of the effects of sin on our minds. Attention to theistic arguments might do that. Also, some of the barriers to religious belief -- such as the problem of evil or the alleged threat of science to religion -- may need to be removed before one can see the light that has been shining within all along.

But the scales can fall from the mind's 'eye' in a wide variety of means: on a mountaintop, while listening to a sermon, through a humbling experience, or by reading The Chronicles of Narnia. The list goes on yet a certain common feature should be noticed (and not the fact that few people have ever acquired belief in God as a result of the study of theistic proofs). The primary obstacle to belief in God seems to be more moral than intellectual. On the mountains one may feel one's smallness in relation to the grandness of it all. The sermon may convict one of sin. The loss of a job or a divorce may reveal one's unjustified pride. And The Chronicles of Narnia may awaken

the dormant faith of a child. In all of these cases, the scales slide off the mind's eye when the overweening self is dethroned (not to mix too many metaphors!). Humility, not proofs, seems more appropriate to the realization of belief in God.

My approach to belief in God has been rather descriptive. I believe that we need to pay a lot more attention to how actual people actually acquire beliefs. The psychology of believing may tell us a lot about our cognitive equipment. The lessons learned from observing people and their beliefs support the position that I have defended: rational people may rationally believe in God without evidence or argument.

Reformed epistemology and the bible

What is the biblical or theological basis for Reformed epistemology? Not much, I'm afraid, but I believe that Scripture woefully underdetermines most any philosophical position. By 'underdetermines' I mean that there is not sufficient inescapable evidence to lead us invariably to one conclusion over another; the data do not determine a particular conclusion. There is some data, but the data are consistent with a (wild) variety of differing theories. Is God inside or outside of time, simple or complex? Does God suffer or is he impassible? Can God can change the past? These, and countless other positions, affirmed by one group of Christians and just as enthusiastically rejected by others, are simply not sufficiently well-supported by Scriptural evidence to make a universally coercive case for them. Likewise a coercive case from Scripture cannot be made for one's apologetic approach; there is simply not

enough unambiguous evidence from Scripture to support evidentialism, presuppositionalism or Reformed Epistemology as the Biblical view.

Here's some of the evidence. The first sort of evidence seems to favor evidentialism: Yahweh calls the Hebrews to reason with him (Isaiah 1:18), the Apostle Paul claims that the creator can be known through his creation (Romans 1:20), and St. Peter tells us to be ready to give a reasoned account of the hope that is within us (I Peter 3:15). Of course, in context these verses do not necessarily imply that it is irrational for anyone to believe in God without first considering the evidence. The reasoning in Isaiah has nothing to do with initial belief in God, the verse from Romans could mean that knowledge of God is either inferentially derived from or immediately produced by the creation, and the reasoned account of St. Peter may simply be "I once was blind but now I see."

On the other hand, Scripture itself simply starts with God: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1)." There is never, within Scripture itself, an attempt to prove the existence of God; if proving God's existence were demanded of all believers, one might expect to find at least one of the believers in the Bible discussing theistic arguments. On the other hand, Scripture is rife with attempts to demonstrate that Yahweh is God (and not, for example, Baal). On the other hand, Paul's and Peter's admonitions do not settle whether or not knowledge of God is produced immediately or through inference. Is Paul claiming that when one sees a beautiful sunset from the top of a mountain and is taken with the awesome grandeur of it all, that one is overwhelmed with belief in God? Or is Paul claiming that in such a

circumstance one reasons thusly: Here is the apparent handiwork of a really terrific creator; it is reasonable to argue from apparent handiwork to real handiwork; therefore, it is likely that a divine handiworker exists. So, maybe Romans 1:20 supports a kind of argument from design. On the other hand, Paul himself never employs the kind of apologetics that a contemporary evidentialist defends (his philosophical arguments in Acts 17 are more accommodations to Greek culture than philosophical arguments, more declaration than inference). On the other hand.....

There are so many other hands, I cringe when any one claims that their apologetic approach is the biblical approach. Anyone can find some support for their position in Scripture. So let a thousand apologetical flowers bloom!

The reason that Scripture underdetermines any contemporary apologetic approach seems clear. The Bible was written during a time when virtually everyone assumed the existence of some god or other. The Bible does try to make a case that Yahweh is God and the New Testament tries to make a case that he has revealed himself uniquely in the Christ (in both instances, the biblical writers refer to the kinds of beliefs that people in their culture might find appealing). But everywhere the existence of a god is assumed. That we should directly import that approach into our contemporary context seems ill-advised. In our culture, a great many people do not believe in the existence of a god. How those people might be best approached, therefore, will require a great deal of human ingenuity and not merely reflection on how it was done in biblical times. Since so much has been left to human ingenuity and since Scripture both underdetermines one's apologetic and was written to and for

another culture, there will be many Christian apologetics and not merely one. What Christian virtue requires, in dealing with one another's views, is charity, intellectual respect, fairness and humility

Postmodernism⁴

I shall, skipping lightly over the history of modern philosophy, define postmodernism against the backdrop of modern philosophy. The early modern world was in intellectual turmoil awaiting a rational decision procedure by a Descartes, a Locke or a Kant. In science, politics and religion, revolutions were rife and the time ripe for a method of rational discernment.

Although it is impossible to set a precise *modus operandi* for modern philosophy, there are some shared concerns among its key players. Foremost among these concerns was the quest for both certainty and rational consensus. Descartes writes: "...I will follow the same path I took yesterday, putting aside everything which admits of the least doubt, as if I had discovered it to be absolutely false. I will go forward until I know something certain -- or, if nothing else, until I at least know for certain that nothing is certain." If the foundations are certain and the principles of inference are truth- and certainty-preserving, then the resultant beliefs must also be certain.

Locke was likewise devoted to certainty: "...I should only show ... how men, barely by the use of their natural faculties, may attain to all the knowledge they have, without the help of any innate impressions, and may arrive at certainty, without any such original notions or principles." And Kant writes: "As regards the *form* of our

enquiry, *certainty* and *clearness* are two essential requirements, rightly to be extracted from anyone who ventures upon so delicate an undertaking. As to *certainty*, I have prescribed to myself the maxim, that in this kind of investigation it is in no wise permissible to hold *opinions*.” The problems with the Cartesian project have been well documented and I shan’t recount them.⁵

A second pervasive assumption of the Cartesian project is internalism.⁶ The central contention of internalism is that the justifying conditions of a belief are somehow internal to the believing agent; whatever it is that justifies belief, and here the accounts vary widely, is something to which the believer has internal access. Justification is a property of beliefs which can be seen and understood simply by careful examination of one’s own set of beliefs. If one’s set of foundational beliefs has the requisite justificational properties, it is a simple matter of careful attention to belief construction to determine if higher level beliefs have similar properties; if one’s higher level beliefs fail to have the right sort of lustre, they ought to be discarded. What makes internalism attractive is that it places the justification of our beliefs without our own intellectual purview. I simply need to check my foundational beliefs, the inferences that I’ve made and the resultant beliefs to see if my beliefs are justified. Beliefs wear their justification on their sleeves, so to speak, according to internalism. So, according to internalism, the entire responsibility for one’s believings belongs to oneself.

I take the Cartesian project as the defining ideal of the modern period; so the postmodern period we are in now should be understood as post-Cartesian. Gone, I believe, are the prospects both for rational certainty and consensus (at least on matters

of fundamental human concern). Likewise, I believe that hopes for internalism are illusory. We don't have direct access to all of the conditions that justify our beliefs. Here's the rub. If internalism is a failure, we don't have access to the conditions necessary for the judgment of whether or not these conditions have been satisfied. Whether or not we are justified in our beliefs may not be simply up to us (even assuming we are very attentive believers).

Plantinga argues that modern foundationalism has misunderstood the nature of justification.⁷ Modern foundationalism is based on an unattainable quest for certainty and is unduly internalist. Plantinga calls the special property that turns true belief into knowledge "warrant." A belief B has warrant for one if and only if B is produced by one's properly functioning cognitive faculties in circumstances to which those faculties are designed to apply; in addition those faculties must be designed for the purpose of producing true beliefs. So, for instance, my belief that there is a computer screen in front of me is warranted if it is produced by my properly functioning perceptual faculties (and not by weariness or dreaming) and if no one is tricking me say, by having removed my computer and replaced it with an exact painting of my computer (they have messed up my cognitive environment); and surely my perceptual faculties have been designed (by God) for the purpose of producing true beliefs. I have stated this succinctly, roughly, partially and without nuance.

Note briefly the portions of Plantinga's definition which are not within one's immediate or direct purview -- whether or not one's faculties are functioning properly, whether or not one's faculties are designed by God, whether or not one's faculties are

designed for the production of true beliefs, whether or not one is using one's faculties in the environment intended for their use (one might be seeing a mirage and taking it for real). We cannot acquire warrant, according to this theory, simply by attending to our beliefs. According to Plantinga, warranted belief or knowledge is not entirely up to us. It depends crucially upon whether or not conditions neither under our direct rational purview nor our conscious control are satisfied. Justification is by faith not by works. Warrant, to be more precise, is not solely due to efforts on our part.

Postmodern apologetics

How might a Reformed epistemologist defend her faith in our postmodern world? Here I shall primarily speak of belief in God, belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good, creator of the universe. I do not have a well worked out strategy for defending Christian belief, although I suspect that the strategy that I suggest can be extended to Christian belief.⁸ Indeed, because of the intrinsic difficulties of Christian belief, I am dubious of any evidentialist approach. But I shall leave this cryptic remark for now and return to it only in my comments on the evidentialists.

According to the theory of warrant developed above, a person has a warranted belief in God if her belief in God is produced by her properly functioning cognitive faculties in circumstances to which those faculties are designed to apply. I have mentioned above that it appears that we do have a faculty which produces belief in God in us in appropriate circumstances. This faculty, more often than not, produces belief in God immediately without the support of a theistic argument. This does not mean that

belief in God is not grounded in experience or that it cannot be based on such an argument. But, if we do have such a cognitive faculty and it produces belief in God in the appropriate circumstances, then belief in God is warranted if it is not based on an argument.

One good apologetic strategy, therefore, is to encourage unbelievers to put themselves in situations where people are typically taken with belief in God: on a mountain, for example, or at the sea we see God's majesty and creative power.⁹ We are far more likely to encounter the Creator if we attend to his creation. Now I am not suggesting that a person in such a circumstance is (tacitly?) processing the argument from design. She is not saying to herself, the world appears designed, if something appears to be designed it is likely designed; therefore, the world, in all likelihood, has a designer. Her judgment that God is creator more than likely wells up within her, ineluctably, perhaps surprisingly. She is taken with belief in God.

There is a variety of circumstances that seem especially appropriate to evoking or awaking belief in God. At the birth of one's child, watching the sunset on the mountains or the ocean, examining the beauty of a flower, noting that we are "fearfully and wonderfully made", or walking through the woods in a time of quiet reflection. These situations often occasion belief in God because in these circumstances we come into contact with the creator and belief in God is quickened, enlivened, or made apparent. The scales fall from the eyes, so to speak, as we see that we are standing on holy ground.

We move from circumstances that are full of wonder to circumstances that are full of terror. Death often awakens a dormant sense of the divine. As we face our own end (which most of us repress, pretending with all our might that we are immortal), we recognize that we are finite, impotent, mere creature. The illusion that we are gods is smashed and we recognize our true impoverished self. Our humiliation in the face of the immense cosmos and the eternity of time which ignore and eradicate our feeble accomplishments permits us to recognize our dependence.¹⁰

If apologetics is helping someone to see or experience God, then one part of apologetics will be assisting people in the removal of barriers to belief. We can help some of the scales fall. This is often called “negative apologetics” -- the attempt to remove intellectual obstacles to faith. Here, in our day and age, the primary issues are the problem of evil, science and religion, and the hermeneutics of suspicion.

By the latter, I mean the hermeneutical critiques of religious belief offered by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. They peer into the dark underbelly of belief and find ignoble motives. In displaying these motives -- the desire for power, the need for a father figure, the fear of death, the justification of one’s socio-economic status -- they seek to undermine religious belief. I believe that the hermeneutics of suspicion provides a much needed corrective to our natural tendency toward spiritual pride¹¹ but, nonetheless, people still need to be shown that this secular trinity has not proven that God does not exist or that it is irrational to believe in God.

The apparent threat of science to religion seems to have recently intensified. Richard Dawkins, whose new appointment at Oxford seems to be to destroy faith, has

stated that Charles Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist.¹² Concerning evolution, Daniel Dennett contends that those who doubt that evolution theory explains the origin of species are inexcusably ignorant and contends that such people should be locked up.¹³ There are at least three options for the thinking Christian apologist. One option is to resist evolutionary theory,¹⁴ another is to remain agnostic about the truth of evolutionary theory,¹⁵ and yet another is to embrace it.¹⁶ The latter option is often difficult for conservative Christians because it seems to remove God from the creative process entirely; God is rendered superfluous. But Christians have progressively embraced the notion that the manner in which God acts might be explained naturalistically. We might thank God for the rain yet recognize that its antecedent causes are various high and low pressure systems. God might use the sun to cause the corn to grow. Neither the corn nor the rain require God as their immediate causes yet God may nonetheless be their ultimate cause. The same may be true of the origin of species.

The problem of evil is the most formidable and apparently intractable obstacle to belief in God and it is easy to see why. It is difficult to imagine that God could exist given the various kinds and amounts of evils that exist in the world today. While Plantinga has refuted the charge that God and evil are logically inconsistent,¹⁷ there still seems to be too much evil for God to exist. The experiences that engender unbelief range from the global -- seeing thousands die in an earthquake -- to the local and personal -- the tragic suffering and death of a (one's) child. When it comes to explaining evil Christians are often tempted by the trivial, the trite and the superficial.

The goods that are appealed to in explaining the suffering often redound to the benefit of others (and perhaps to God) but not to the sufferer herself. Even if the child's death brought his father to believe in God, we still haven't adequately explained the tragedy with respect to the child. Even if a poor country learns from the earthquake how to build stronger houses, we still haven't fully explained how God could permit the suffering of the people involved. Not just any good that comes about because of some evil is an adequate explanation of that evil. We shouldn't underestimate the suffering of the world and we shouldn't glibly explain it away. "The world's more full of weepin'," according to Yeats' haunting refrain, "than we can understand."

I can only suggest that Christian apologists do their homework. A great deal of recent thought has gone into the problem of evil. It is useful, I believe, to venture outside our comfortable sphere of belief -- to hear challenges in their full weight and to learn how other theistic traditions address the problem of evil. I have found the Jewish tradition especially insightful on both counts; Jews have faced unspeakable evil and many have come out with a deeper, more reflective faith. One thing is certain, this we learn from the book of Job, we are more likely to go wrong than right in our theodicies. Intellectual humility in the face of horrific evil is called for.

Again, nothing that I have said precludes the use of arguments in apologetics. I think we do best, however, when we are aware of and admit to the limits of argument. There simply is not a belief-neutral, obvious set of beliefs upon which to base theistic arguments. That is, premises in theistic proofs are often not obvious (even though, at first glance, they might seem to be). In addition, premises in theistic proofs are often

acceptable only to those who either already believe or aren't ardently opposed to religious belief. These caveats are true not only of theistic arguments but of most arguments concerning matters of fundamental human concern.

I won't rehearse the theistic arguments or their criticisms because the evidentialists in this collection will already have done so. I have, however, discussed and defended some of the arguments as have other Reformed epistemologists.¹⁸ One thing seems clear: people need to be disposed to accept the premises of the so-called proofs.¹⁹ We are attempting to prove something to someone and that someone has been enculturated to accept certain things and to reject others.

I lectured about reason and belief in God in Ukraine and learned first-hand the barriers to effective rational dialogue with people whose institutionally enforced atheism began shortly after birth. How does one persuade a convinced materialist that morality requires God or that the universe depends upon God for its existence? What beliefs do we share in common to which either of us could appeal to persuade the other of the truth of theism or materialism?²⁰ I recently observed one of my colleagues trying to persuade Chinese students of the moral need for atonement -- of the need to bridge the gap between our feeble moral capacities and the severe moral demand.²¹ These students had been taught, as have most Chinese people, that humans are by nature good and resisted my colleague's efforts to persuade them of original sin. There is an indifference to religion among the Chinese that is not attributable to perniciousness. How do you persuade such people of their need for a saviour?

I could provide example upon example to demonstrate that a successful proof is not simply a matter of presenting true premises. In matters of fundamental human concern, truth is not obvious. Christian apologists often waive theistic arguments around as if the truth were obvious and the proofs simple. But these sorts of fundamental truths are neither obvious nor simple (witness that apparently rational people around the world disagree about nearly every matter of fundamental human concern). I have seldom seen a debate between, say, a Democrat and a Republican in which the Democrats in the audience did not declare a victory for the Democrat (or the Republicans for the Republican).²² This is a debate among people who share a common commitment to democracy. What about a debate between a Marxist and a capitalist? How does the capitalist persuade the Marxist that people have a natural right to property? Is it really so obvious that people have a natural right to property? If so, why did nearly everyone fail to recognize this “obvious truth” until the time of John Locke?

My point is not to make people skeptics. Rather it is my intention to demonstrate the obvious truth that rational people rationally disagree. What people start with determines what people will end up with. What people reason from determines the kinds of inferences that it is rationally permissible for them to accept. There simply is no belief-neutral, obvious and simple foundation of beliefs to which to appeal in arguing for the existence of God. The starting point for our beliefs is our socio-cultural upbringing. Our beliefs are situated in a specific historical context. Should you embark on the reason-giving project, you need to recognize this and to try your best to find some common beliefs to appeal to.

Conclusion

There is deliberate exaggeration in the title of this essay “Without Proof or Evidence”. I have argued that one can reasonably believe in God on the basis of an argument. Yet it is also my contention that people who believe in an immediate fashion do not believe groundlessly. The basis of some people’s belief in God is the experience of God. The circumstances described above provide the occasion of a legitimate encounter with God. So belief in God can be based in reason or the evidence of religious experience. But experience of God need not be the basis of a warranted belief in God. One’s properly functioning cognitive faculties can produce belief in God in the appropriate circumstances with or without argument, evidence or religious experience.²³

¹ This story is retold in Kelly James Clark, Philosophers Who Believe (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 7-16.

² Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, Faith and Rationality (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

³ See Kelly James Clark, Philosophers Who Believe (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

⁴ This section is conceptually difficult and unduly compressed. But it is beyond the scope of this essay to develop it in any more detail. Feel free to skip to the next section if you like.

⁵ The Cartesian, Lockean and Kantian foundations proved insufficient for justifying significant beliefs; that is, there are beliefs which we surely know which are reduced to mere belief or faith on their accounts. Descartes and his followers were trying to make epistemological gold out of base metals. Belief in other minds, the past, an enduring self, just to mention a few, could not be justified on Cartesian assumptions. Given that we know that there are other persons, that we have a self that persists through time, and that world has a substantial past, Cartesian foundationalism must be wrong.

⁶ Although internalism is a difficult term, I shall describe some common characteristics which are agreed upon by all, or nearly all, of its adherents.

⁷ Alvin Plantinga, Warrant: The Current Debate and Warrant and Proper Function (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁸ For a well-developed Reformed defense of Christian belief see Alvin Plantinga, Warranted Christian Belief (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁹ I think Pascal's wager is intended to persuade people that it is worth attending to one's immortality and that given the stakes it is worth taking the effort to see if God exists or not.

¹⁰ I develop this in my When Faith Is Not Enough (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), Part II.

¹¹ For a fascinating and challenging defense of the spiritual benefits of studying Marx, Freud and Nietzsche see Merold Westphal, Suspicion and Faith (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998). Thinking Christians skip this book at their peril.

¹² Richard Dawkins, The Blind Watchmaker (New York: Norton, 1987)

¹³ One hopes that Dennett was just exaggerating. At any rate, he makes these statements in Darwin's Dangerous Idea (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 47, 519.

¹⁴ Recent critics of evolutionary theory include Michael Denton, Evolution: A Theory in Crisis (Bethesda, Maryland: Adler & Adler, 1986), Michael Behe, Darwin's Black Box (New York: Touchstone, 1996) and Philip Johnson, Darwin on Trial (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1991).

¹⁵ For an excellent introduction to bad arguments on both sides of the issue, see Del Ratzsch, The Battle of Beginnings (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

¹⁶ For a Christian defense of evolutionary theory, see Howard Van Till, The Fourth Day (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986).

¹⁷ Alvin Plantinga, God, Freedom and Evil (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1977), 7-64.

¹⁸ See Clark, Return to Reason, ch. 1 and Plantinga, God, Freedom and Evil, 85-112.

¹⁹ I say proofs "so called". In Return to Reason, I defend person-relative proofs. For purposes of this essay we will understand "proof" as "reasons to believe."

²⁰ I left hoping that God would take the circumstances of their atheism into account. Here, it seems to me, the Soviet social engineers severely distorted their cognitive environment. I also hoped that the young people, who had not been so thoroughly inculcated in atheism, might find opportunity to come to know God.

²¹ See his book, John Hare, The Moral Gap (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²² The exceptions prove the rule. If there is a consensus, one of the debaters had to have been a dismal failure to persuade even the faithful of their deficiencies.

²³ Portions of this essay were published previously. I have drawn from "Plantinga vs. Oliphint: And the Winner Is....", Calvin Theological Journal April 1998, Vol. 33, No. 1, 160-169; and "How Real People Believe", Modern Reformation, January/February 1998, vol. 7, no. 1, 23-26. These essays are used with permission.