Some excerpts from

An Interview With Alvin Plantinga

I certainly think God is real, that there really is a being of this sort, and that it is not the case that God exists only in the human imagination. It is harder to say why I believe this. I do think there are good theistic arguments—quite a large number of them; but I don’t really believe in God on the basis of these arguments. Perhaps they play some kind of a role here, but for me at least the basic impulse to believe comes from a different source. I’d put it like this: It seems to me that I sometimes experience God, that I am sometimes aware of his presence. God sometimes seems as real to me as my children or the people I work with. But that isn’t the entire answer either. For in addition to this awareness of God, there is also something else—I simply find myself believing in God.

This question—why do you think God is real?—can be asked in several ways. Taken one way, it is a request for evidence: ‘What is your evidence for the existence of such a being, that is, what sorts of arguments do you have for that rather momentous conclusion?’ Here I’d have to say I don’t really believe on the basis of arguments, just as I don’t typically hold memory or perceptual or a priori beliefs on the basis of argument or propositional evidence.

You can also ask this question in such a way that the answer says something about the way in which this belief gets into my noetic structure: Is it a matter of perception? or testimony? or rational intuition? or what? This really calls for an epistemology of belief in God—an account of the faculties or belief-producing processes that are responsible for such belief. In my forthcoming book Warranted Christian Belief I try to say something sensible along these lines.

“How long have I believed this?” I can’t remember a time when I didn’t believe this; I was taught about God as a child, both at home and in church, much as I was taught that there is such a place as Africa or such a person as Columbus. But then when I was about fourteen or so, something happened to me, as to many people: These beliefs became much more real to me; it seemed to me that, as I said above, I was actually aware of God’s presence, that I could actually be related to him as one person to another. But as an attempt to describe the phenomenology of my belief, this is very inadequate.

I think you are right that many philosophers think religious belief doesn’t come from a source of belief that produces warranted belief: The belief-producing processes that are responsible for belief in God, for example, are not a source of warranted belief. Unlike, for example, perceptual beliefs, belief in God is not usually produced by cognitive processes that are functioning properly in the right kind of environment and have as their purpose the production of true belief. This is in contrast to philosophical beliefs, which are ordinarily a product of reason, which is a faculty directed at the production of true beliefs, even if disagreement runs rife in philosophy. And the idea would be, then, that
theistic belief is warranted and respectable only if it is arrived at by way of reason-rational reflection and argument—rather than in some other way. A specific example of this sort of view would be Freud’s claim that theistic belief is ordinarily a product of wish fulfillment, not rational reflection, and is therefore epistemically second rate.

But the claim that theistic belief is warranted only if it is produced by rational reflection is itself a whopping epistemological assumption. It is not, of course, self-evident; it requires argumentation if it is to be held in a rational way. And where is the argument? Freud just assumes that theism is false and then proposes the best hypothesis he can think of to explain the widespread acceptance of theistic belief. (Inculcation by religious authorities isn’t a very good hypothesis, just because first, such teaching won’t “take” unless there is something in our nature that resonates to it, and second, lots of people become believers in God contrary to what they are taught by parents and other authorities—consider the recent history of China and the former Soviet Union.) Believers in God, on the other hand, will ordinarily, at least if they think about it, see the origin of theistic belief in something like Calvin’s sensus divinitatis, a faculty or cognitive process that God has created in us and that enables us to know of his existence and something of his nature and character. So of course they wouldn’t agree that theistic belief comes from a source like wish fulfillment, a source that doesn’t have the production of true belief as part of its function or purpose. In Warranted Christian Belief, I argue that both theistic belief and full-blown Christian belief are such that if they are true, they are very likely warranted. (If there really is such a person as God, then he would undoubtedly want us to know something about him, and the fact that the vast bulk of the world’s population believes in God or something like God would be explained by way of his having instilled in us a means of coming to know about him.) If this is right, the epistemological view of the philosophers you mention—that theistic belief doesn’t come from a cognitive source that produces warranted belief—really depends upon a metaphysical belief: that theistic belief is not in fact true. As far as I can see, most of these philosophers simply presuppose this: They don’t ordinarily give much by way of serious argument for it.

The thought that I had been brought up at a different place and time, I would have held quite different beliefs—that thought can induce a certain intellectual vertigo. But I don’t know what to infer from that. Very many of my beliefs are of that character. Many of my scientific beliefs—relativity theory, for example, or that the distance to the moon is more than 200,000 miles—are like that. So are many of my moral beliefs. I believe, for example, that racism is wrong; but no doubt there are many places and times such that if I had been brought up there and then I would not have had this belief. Does that mean that there is something suspect about the belief? I doubt it. So I’d have to agree that there are other places and times such that if I had been brought up at those places and times I probably would not have held some of the religious beliefs I do hold; but I can’t see, so far, that that is a point against those beliefs.
You asked me whether I could give advice as to how to come to hold Christian belief. I gave you the best answer I could, but you didn’t like it. [The advice was similar to Pascal’s advice. – SPS] It’s not that you don’t like it because you don’t think it is effective advice; the problem instead seems to be that following the same or similar advice, one might very well come to believe what was false or in some other way objectionable. But first, why is that an objection? I ask you how to get rid of the tree in my backyard; you say, “Use an ax.” It’s no objection that one can get into trouble using an ax (maybe cutting down the wrong tree). The same goes here. Granted: This method can lead to false belief; but that in itself is not much of an objection. Not just any means to an end is appropriate, of course: Is the idea that there is something morally objectionable about this advice? If so, I certainly can’t see what it might be.

Furthermore, if what we are really looking for is a means of fixing belief that is guaranteed not to lead to falsehood, we will be looking for a long time. The fact is most of the large-scale ways in which we fix belief suffer from that same debility – here that double standard raises its ugly head again.

Still further, “belief by osmosis” is one of the main ways in which we form belief; given the human condition, furthermore, it is unavoidable. True: It can lead to false belief as well as true; but in that regard it is no worse than induction, deduction, getting a college education, or studying philosophy.

I’m sort of inclined to think you are still hankering after something like a philosophical argument or proof for belief in God or the central tenets of Christian belief. But as I’ve already said, that’s the wrong approach. First, philosophical arguments can’t accomplish much when it comes to the existence of really important things – other people, material objects, the past, moral standards, and the like. One really wouldn’t expect it to be of much use in the present context. And in any event, what is most important about being a Christian is probably not what one believes, but (as Jonathan Edwards says) what one loves and hates, what one is prepared to commit one’s life to. Being a Christian is perhaps less a matter of intellect than will – both the affective side of the will and the executive side. What really counts here is wanting to believe in God and love Him, or wanting to want to believe in and love Him.

I really don’t see why you are mystified that I, as you say, a philosopher, believe in Jesus and the Bible. Don’t we agree that there is nothing philosophically unrespectable about Christian belief? At any rate I don’t know of any cogent philosophical argument against such belief or against its rational acceptability. You suggest that “beliefs acquired by way of religious authorities fall as the first victims…of philosophical inquiry.” I don’t think the ultimate source of Christian belief (see below) is religious authority, but I certainly haven’t found anything in philosophical inquiry that calls such belief into question. Of course, some philosophers reject and argue against such beliefs; but their rejection doesn’t as such call Christian belief into question, and their arguments don’t
seem to me to be cogent. Furthermore, Christian belief is not weird, crazy, unprecedented, unheard of among people generally, or among philosophers. So I’m not clear about why you are mystified.

You ask, “Is it just that, well, you were raised that way and I wasn’t?” I guess you are asking why I believe these things. Presumably you aren’t asking me for propositional evidence; we both know that I don’t believe them on the basis of argument or propositional evidence. I believe them, rather, because they have what we could call “doxastic evidence”; they simply seem to me to be true (just as memory or a priori beliefs do); when I think about them, they (or I) have the phenomenology that goes with thinking about a belief I hold by memory or perception or a priori intuition. Are you perhaps asking me to give an opinion on the source of Christian belief, the faculty or belief-producing process that produces them? Freud thought the source was wishful thinking; are you asking me what I think the source is? Well, of course I don’t think the ultimate source is wishful thinking, or parental influence, or the influence of “religious authorities” – although certainly I originally believed things because I was taught them. (Just as you, no doubt, originally believed that some mountains are covered with snow and ice in the middle of the summer because you were taught this.) I’d be inclined to say, instead, that the source of belief in God is something like what John Calvin calls the “sensus divinitatis,” a sort of natural instinct implanted (by God) in us human beings to believe in God and to see his hand in the world around us. But I am much less sure of any such epistemological account of belief in God than I am of the truth of that belief.

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I do have something else to offer as a person rather than as a philosopher: I can testify to the fact that it sometimes seems to me (as it does to many others) that I experience the presence of God. But, of course, I don’t take it that you should or would necessarily be moved by that testimony on my part. So there really isn’t much I can do with respect to contributing to your or someone else’s coming to believe in God. According to Christian belief, faith is a gift – a gift from God. (A gift, I believe, that is offered to anyone who really wants it.) That’s why I said I’d have to leave this up to God. I did not for a minute mean to suggest I thought you were unduly stubborn, or anything of that sort. Not at all. You say:

We might, of course, all be wrong about everything – I take it we would both agree to that – but surely if philosopher A, who believes that not X, cannot fathom how it is possible that philosopher B believes X, then something is deeply wrong – either with philosopher A, or with philosopher B, or else with philosophy itself.

That seems right; I think the conclusion has to be that there is something wrong with one or the other of us. Given what I believe, I am committed to supposing that you are blind in some important way. Given what you believe, you are committed to supposing that I am a victim of some kind of illusion, as Freud suggested, some kind of psychological belief-producing mechanism that is aimed, not at the production of true beliefs, but at the production of beliefs with some other property—perhaps the property of enabling one to continue on in this bleak and impersonal world. I can’t see any other alternative.