

PLANTINGA'S EPISTEMOLOGY OF RELIGION – SOME QUESTIONS

A EPISTEMOLOGIA DA RELIGIÃO DE PLANTINGA – ALGUMAS QUESTÕES

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ABSTRACT – This paper raises some questions and objections to Alvin Plantinga's epistemology of religion. In Part I, we have a non-believer speaking (an agnostic about God, spirits or the like). She is in fact an epistemologist and is not very comfortable with Plantinga's reformed epistemology. In Part II, we have a Christian believer, and the questions will therefore be from the perspective of someone who is inside, who sincerely believes the main teachings of Christian religion. We do not mean by those questions, however, that Plantinga's approach is wrong. It only needs some clarifications.

KEYWORDS – Plantinga. Reformed epistemology. Basic beliefs.

RESUMO – Este artigo levanta algumas questões e objeções à epistemologia da religião de Alvin Plantinga. Na Parte I, temos um não-crente falando (um agnóstico sobre Deus, espíritos e coisas semelhantes). Ele de fato é um epistemólogo e não está muito confortável com a epistemologia reformada de Plantinga. Na Parte II, temos um crente cristão, e as questões, portanto, serão da perspectiva de alguém que está dentro, que sinceramente acredita nos principais ensinamentos da religião cristã. Não queremos dar a entender por tais questões, entretanto, que a abordagem de Plantinga é errada. Ela somente necessita de alguns esclarecimentos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE – Plantinga. Epistemologia reformada. Crenças básicas.

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Alvin Plantinga's epistemology of religion is certainly the most important example of the so-called "Reformed Epistemology", which unfortunately is not very known in Brazil. Reformed Epistemology is an approach to philosophy of religion, in general, and to epistemology of religion, in particular, that following Calvin's Reformed Theology (that's why "Reformed Epistemology") breaks up with natural theology, that is, the traditional thought that epistemology of religion means proofs about the existence of God, and that the rationality of the theist or of the Christian believer is proportional to her capability of producing those proofs. Reformed Epistemology – especially Plantinga's – is refreshing because it shows us that there are other ways of thinking about the rationality of religious beliefs – ways that, in my opinion, are closer to the experience of most religious people. More specifically, according to Plantinga (1983, 2000) we can think about some religious beliefs as *basic* or *properly basic* (in Plantinga's terminology). These religious beliefs are formed and held *without arguments* or any kind of inference, in a *direct* way, and can be justified and warranted in being so formed and held. For just that, Plantinga's work on the subject must be more known and appreciated.

Of course, we can raise objections to this approach, though. And that's the focus of this paper. I don't purport to have new objections, however, and much less knockdown objections to Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology. What I do have are questions – and *only* questions! – that "naturally" arise when we get acquainted with Plantinga's approach. These questions (and the future answers, of course) will certainly be the occasion to clarify his thought for all of us. So I hope.

We can divide our questions into two parts. For the first part, we will have a non-believer speaking (an agnostic about God, spirits or the like). She is in fact an epistemologist. And I think I should say that she is not very comfortable with Plantinga's approach, seeming to be a little rude sometimes. For the second part, we'll have a believer, a Christian believer, and the questions will therefore be from the perspective of someone who is inside, who sincerely believes the main teachings of Christian religion.

I

So goes the non-believer. She will talk directly to Professor Plantinga:

"Professor Plantinga: I'm very suspicious of your philosophical work on religion, and I'll say why. First of all, you have brought the notion of *design plan* into your account of *warranted belief* (Plantinga, 1993),

and we all know why. It fits very well, in fact, *too* well, in your 'design plan' of introducing *God* on the epistemological stage. And no wonder you can construct models, like your Aquinas/Calvin model (Plantinga, 2000), where all the main Christian beliefs are warranted because, among other things, they are formed according to a design plan – *God's plan!* Why not just keep something like Goldman's (1979) reliability condition of warrant plus something about the right environment? It seems that you kindly give us something just to take something back a little later!

"But that's not the worst part. When we get to your 'Internal Instigation of the Holy Spirit' (Plantinga, 2000, Chapter 8), a purported cognitive faculty or process that delivers (properly) *basic* beliefs to the Christian believer, we have to stop. What's that? We have a problem here. In fact, it's very problematic, to say the least, to bring to the epistemological scene a purported cognitive faculty or power or process whose existence is not recognized by most epistemologists (not to say most people!) *and* whose deliverances cannot be evaluated, especially with respect to its reliability!

"I know you'll reply there is no problem here. Maybe you'll point out that we usually discuss about and evaluate purported cognitive faculties or powers whose existence are controversial and even not recognized by most people; for example, clairvoyance. It's true. But in these cases, we can and do evaluate them examining the reliability of their purported deliverances. So, in the case of clairvoyance, supposedly most epistemologists don't recognize it as a real cognitive faculty or power; nonetheless, they can evaluate it by checking whether its alleged deliverances are reliable or not. But that is not the case with your "Internal Instigation of the Holy Spirit". How can we check its reliability? If a Christian believer, instigated by the Holy Spirit, believes, in a basic way, that Jesus is God and that Jesus loves her, how can we check the reliability of this 'cognitive' process?

"But now you can rejoin, I know, saying that there are other cognitive faculties whose reliability we cannot check, at least not without epistemic circularity (see Alston, 1993; Cohen, 2002). The best example (from Alston) is perception in general. True. But note that now we have the opposite case. We cannot check its reliability (without circularity), but we do recognize, all of us, the *existence* of this cognitive faculty that, even if unreliable, delivers perceptual beliefs all the time in all of us (if, of course, there are other people besides me!).

"So, to sum up: it seems legitimate to bring to the epistemological discussion a purported cognitive faculty or process when its existence is generally recognized or, at least, when its alleged deliverances can

be checked with respect to its reliability. Unfortunately, your internal instigation of the Holy Spirit doesn't meet either of those plausible conditions.

“Finally, I have a third question or objection for you. It has to do with the *de facto* question about Christian belief. I know that in your major work on epistemology of religion, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Plantinga, 2000), about which we are discussing, you emphatically say that you aren't defending the truth of the Christian belief, nor even its warrant. You clearly say that, what you are defending is that *if Christian belief is true, then it is probably warranted* (in a way pretty much like your A/C model). In other words, the *de jure* question is not independent of the *de facto* question (ibid., Chapter 6).

“OK. So if I want to know whether Christian belief is *warranted*, I have to know whether it is *true*. OK, again. Now I *want* to know whether Christian belief (understood as the main teachings of Christianity) is true. I need your help. What am I supposed to do? Your A/C model says that Christian belief is formed in a basic way, that is, without the need of arguments, without the need of any propositional evidence. So, presumably, you won't show me any arguments for the existence of God or the like. Following your (extended) model (ibid., Chapter 8), you will probably show me or tell me some important verse from Scriptures. And we, you and me, will have to wait for the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit working on me, producing the relevant beliefs. But what if I don't see, in a basic way, what you see (or what you say you see), as it has actually happened with me and many others? What can I do? I look and look at the Bible and don't see what is supposedly obvious for you! But I really want to know about the truth or not of Christian belief! What can I do now?

“The situation is a little embarrassing, and you have only two options. You can get tired and eventually stop trying to help me see (in a basic way) the truth of Christian belief – what may be embarrassing again for you – or you can try to convince me through one or more arguments, contrary to the suggestion of your A/C model! That seems embarrassing for you again! After all, why all this model, and the whole Reformed Epistemology, if we can and have to come back to the old natural theology?

“So, it seems that, if I want to know about the truth of the Christian belief (and therefore of its warrant or not), we will have a great probability of getting to embarrassing situations – for me, for you, or for both of us. There must be something wrong with your Reformed Epistemology!

“Definitively if some day I come to be a Christian, I'll have to be a Catholic!”.

II

Now comes the Christian believer. She has only one important question, but a crucial one, and will address Professor Plantinga in the third person.

"I'm a Christian, believing in God and in all main teachings of Christianity. In fact, I think I can't help believing them, as if a strong power forced me to see them as true. Interesting enough, I've been told about Professor Plantinga's work, especially about his Reformed Epistemology. I agree with him. I haven't come to believe in God and His teachings based on proofs and arguments of any sort. It just happened that from one point in time on I started to see some Christian propositions as true, and clearly true. Plantinga says 'in a properly basic way'. Yes, exactly!

"Sometimes, however, I wonder whether I'm not getting fanatical or even crazy about religious matters. I can't help believing those religious teachings, as I told, but I still can wonder, at least sometimes, whether I'm not being misled by my (let me say) religious intuitions and insights. I know very well, from my past experiences, that sometimes what had used to seem obvious for me turned out to be wrong or false later. Could it be that what seems obvious for me now about religious matters will turn out to be false in the future? Oh, I must be in a religious crisis!

"Well, Professor Plantinga says (following Aquinas and Calvin) that, what I call 'religious intuitions or insights' are or, more exactly, *can be* the internal instigations of the Holy Spirit (2000). He also says that, *if this A/C model is true, then* my Christian beliefs are also true; and, most importantly, *if* Christian belief is true (as well as the A/C model), *then* my basic beliefs are externally *rational and warranted*: I'm not fanatical, crazy or misled by my religious faculties!

"But the problem is that I don't want a conditional: '*If this A/C model is true...*'. Or, '*If Christian belief is true...*'. I have so far believed Christian teaching is true. I have so far *seen* it as true. But now I question: are my 'spiritual eyes' reliable? Are my religious beliefs not only true (they could be true by accident), but also *warranted*? (To use Professor Plantinga's terminology). It doesn't work for me to say that *if* Christian belief is *true, then* my spiritual eyes (or whatever) are reliable and my beliefs are warranted. That doesn't help me at all!

"I could summarize my present situation saying that I am a Christian. I do believe the Christian teachings are true. But at the same time I ask or should ask: Why do I believe them? Because the Holy Spirit tells me in a basic way that they are true? But the Holy Spirit himself is part of my Christian beliefs, whose epistemic status I'm now questioning!

“Oh, don't tell me that I can't have both this questioning and my Christian beliefs, as though they were incompatible! I don't become a non-Christian because of these questions, do I? I think a famous Christian has said that Faith searches for understanding...”.

III

We do not mean by all the questions in Part I and II that Plantinga's epistemology of religion is wrong and therefore that we should go back to the old natural theology, as some authors have argued (see Zagzebski, 1993). In fact, as we have said before, Plantinga's epistemology of religion seems to give us an account that is closer to what actually happens with the believer, especially with her religious experience. On the other hand, natural theology seems to be so far from the believer's reality! Nevertheless, there are important questions that must be clarified by Plantinga and the Reformed epistemologists. Certainly everyone will gain from their answers.

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