

*Sensus Divinitatis* or Divine Hiddenness?  
Alvin Plantinga and J. L. Schellenberg  
on Knowledge of God

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*Knowledge and Christian Belief.* By Alvin Plantinga. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2015. vii + 129 pp. \$16.00 (paper).

*The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy's New Challenge to Belief in God.* By J. L. Schellenberg. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. vii + 142 pp. \$35.00 (cloth).

Both of the books under review present important arguments for a broader audience that the authors had previously made in a more technical manner for professional philosophers. Plantinga's also summarizes a long, distinguished, and provocative contribution to epistemology and thus requires more background to appreciate fully, so the treatments are unequal in length but I hope equal in illumination.

For the past fifty years—ever since the publication of his first book *God and Other Minds* in 1967—Alvin Plantinga has been considered one of the most influential philosophers of religion in the world.<sup>1</sup> Born in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1932 of Dutch Reformed parents and brought up in the Christian Reformed Church, Plantinga taught at Wayne State University, Calvin College, and the University of Notre Dame until his retirement in 2010. In the first of several volumes published over the past few decades engaging critically

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<sup>1</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967). A paperback edition with a new preface was published in 1990.

with various aspects of his thought, the editors write: “Besides his landmark work in the philosophy of religion, Plantinga has authored many penetrating and beautifully crafted studies in metaphysics, epistemology, and the philosophy of mind. In particular, his writings in the area of metaphysics concerned with necessity, possibility, essence and accident are of profound significance.”<sup>2</sup>

Beginning in the mid-1980s, however, Plantinga’s primary research focus began to shift from metaphysics to epistemology—both in regard to the general theory of knowledge and the rationality of religious belief. Against the common “evidentialist” objection that belief in God is only rational if supported by valid philosophical arguments, the main assertion of Plantinga’s “Reformed Epistemology” is that belief in God is in fact “properly basic”—that is, entirely rational whether any arguments support it or not.<sup>3</sup> Such proper basicity is not unique to religious belief but also holds for memory, sense perception, and *a priori* beliefs regarding logical or mathematical truths. Plantinga thus argues not simply against the evidentialist objection to belief in God but against the broader epistemological framework in which it belongs, namely the “classical foundationalism” derived from Descartes and Locke. Along with his colleague Nicholas Wolterstorff, Plantinga was thus a signal voice in directing our attention away from exclusive concern about the validity or invalidity of specific theistic arguments to *meta-epistemology*, and thus to a deeper awareness that there is more than one way in which we can (and should) think about our intellectual obligations, assumptions, and capacities.

In 1993 Plantinga published two substantial contributions to the general theory of knowledge, *Warrant: The Current Debate* and *Warrant and Proper Function*, which were then followed in 2000 by a massive, five-hundred-page *magnum opus*, *Warranted Christian Belief*, in which he sought to synthesize his broader epistemological concerns

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<sup>2</sup> James E. Tomberlin and Peter van Inwagen, eds., *Alvin Plantinga* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing, 1985), ix. His major work in metaphysics from this period is *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974). A more accessible version of the various arguments advanced in both *God and Other Minds* and *The Nature of Necessity* may be found in Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, initially published by Harper and Row in 1974 and then later republished and maintained in print by Eerdmans.

<sup>3</sup> Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 16–93.

with his religious convictions.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, he says that *Warranted Christian Belief* serves simultaneously as the third volume in his *Warrant* trilogy and as a sequel to *God and Other Minds* and his classic essay “Reason and Belief in God.”<sup>5</sup> As the common element in the title of all three volumes indicates, Plantinga’s distinctive concern is not with the more familiar epistemological category of “justification” (which he believes is inevitably and unhelpfully limited to concerns about intellectual obligations) but with “warrant,” which he defines as the “elusive further quality or quantity which, or enough of which, stands between knowledge and mere true belief.”<sup>6</sup> That is, what must be added to a given instance of true belief in order for it to constitute actual knowledge? Plantinga’s answer is that “a belief has warrant just if it is produced by cognitive processes or faculties that are functioning properly, in a cognitive environment that is propitious for that exercise of cognitive powers, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at the production of true belief.”<sup>7</sup> And in *Warranted Christian Belief* he goes on to apply this theory of warrant and proper function not just to belief in God but to more specific Christian beliefs such as the doctrines of the Trinity, Incarnation, and atonement, arguing that in many cases such beliefs are not only rational but warranted and thus—if they are also *true*—may be considered as instances of actual *knowledge*. As with his work in metaphysics, Plantinga’s various epistemological proposals have generated considerable commentary, critique, and controversy.

In an attempt to make the arguments of *Warranted Christian Belief* more accessible to a broader audience, Plantinga recently published *Knowledge and Christian Belief*. As he says in the preface, it is a “shorter and (I hope) more user-friendly version” of the earlier volume, with some shifts of emphasis and minor changes, but mostly incorporating the actual words of the previous book, albeit boiled down to just over 125 pages.<sup>8</sup> A reviewer familiar with the original volume is thus faced with the dilemma of whether to focus on *Knowledge and Christian Belief* as a summation of Plantinga’s religious epistemology

<sup>4</sup> All of the *Warrant* volumes are published by Oxford University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 68.

<sup>6</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), vi; and see also Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 25–28.

<sup>7</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, xi.

<sup>8</sup> Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, vii.

or as a condensed version of *Warranted Christian Belief*. I will begin with the former and conclude with the latter.

Plantinga says that beliefs can have two kinds of defect: they can be *false* or *irrational*. While atheists of course hold that religious beliefs are false (the *de facto* objection), Plantinga argues that most intellectual critiques of religion focus more strategically on whether or not such beliefs are rational (the *de jure* objection). Of the various versions of the *de jure* objection, Plantinga thinks that the most serious are those of Marx and Freud, who in different ways claim that religious beliefs, whether true or false, are not aimed properly at reality. Or, in the terms of Plantinga's epistemology outlined above, Marx and Freud hold that religious beliefs, whether true or false, lack *warrant*.<sup>9</sup> The next five chapters of the book (3–7) thus attempt to answer this *de jure* objection by presenting what Plantinga calls the extended Aquinas/Calvin (A/C) model, in which the proper function of the human cognitive design plan includes a *sensus divinitatis* providing basic belief in the existence of God, and in which the combined activity of the message of scripture, the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, and the response of faith (both intellectual and affective) supplies the more detailed doctrines of Christian belief. This A/C model, Plantinga argues, provides a sufficient response to the *de jure* objection, even as it (intentionally) leaves unanswered the *de facto* objection that such beliefs are actually false. In other words, if Christian beliefs are true, then according to this model they are warranted.

However, there remain three major challenges to the warrant potentially provided by the A/C model—challenges which according to contemporary epistemological terminology Plantinga calls “defeaters”—and in the remaining chapters (8–10) he deals with them in turn: historical biblical criticism (HBC), religious pluralism, and the amount of suffering in the world. To be clear, for Plantinga HBC is not a defeater *as such*, but only when it argues specifically *against* core Christian doctrines such as the divinity, resurrection, or (in the most extreme case) historical existence of Jesus of Nazareth. Plantinga concludes that none of the three potential defeaters constitutes a legitimate threat to the A/C model and its capacity to provide warrant for such Christian beliefs—again, however, assuming that they are true. But are they true? In the final paragraph of the book Plantinga writes:

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<sup>9</sup> Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 25.

Here we pass beyond the competence of philosophy. In my opinion no argument with premises accepted by everyone or nearly everyone is strong enough to support full-blown Christian belief, even if such belief is, as I think it is, more probable than not with respect to premises of that kind. Speaking for myself and not in the name of philosophy, I can say only that it does, indeed, seem to me to be true, and to be the maximally important truth.<sup>10</sup>

Having summarized *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, I am not sure that Plantinga's various arguments benefit from being thus presented in such condensed form. This is not just a matter of maintaining their necessary subtlety and sophistication, although that is certainly a concern, but also of proportion and emphasis. As those who have followed Plantinga's work over the decades know, while he has great respect for atheistic philosophers whom he regards as fellow seekers after truth and whose work in metaphysics, epistemology, and logic is crucial to his own, he has nothing but contempt for liberal theologians and biblical scholars whom he regards as intellectually vacuous and slaves to mindless academic fashion. And while his caustic wit and raillery at the expense of such foolishness is occasionally refreshing when encountered in the footnotes of his major works, this element seems unduly present here. In short, *Knowledge and Christian Belief* would be a better text if the intra-Christian and anti-HBC polemic had been omitted or at least moderated. Likewise, instead of simply offering a boiled-down version of *Warranted Christian Belief*, with a chapter devoted to each of the larger book's main concerns, a strategically selective adaptation would have been more helpful.

More substantially, and now addressing *Warranted Christian Belief* as well, although Plantinga does indeed draw on Aquinas in developing his A/C model, he forthrightly admits that the Calvinist element is more dominant in his thought, and that is especially clear in the role assigned to scripture. It is not just that Plantinga is committed to the concept of scripture as a single text whose primary author is God, but that scripture in his model floats largely free of church, historical tradition, or any communal context. Plantinga admits in a footnote that his model might thus seem "unduly individualistic" but then argues that it does not in fact "preclude the importance of the

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<sup>10</sup> Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 126.

Christian community and the church to the belief of the individual Christian”—but the very fact that this crucial element is relegated to an apologetic footnote halfway through each volume is significant.<sup>11</sup> The A/C model is indeed unduly individualistic: the paradigm of Christian belief as Plantinga conceives it is a person whose own cognitive processes naturally lead her to believe in God; who then reads her translated Bible, having the core Christian doctrines revealed to her mind and sealed upon her heart by the Holy Spirit; who then considers all possible defeaters; and who finally concludes that nothing prohibits her from holding these beliefs—assuming that they are true. Such problematic and implausible individualism in regard to the production and maintenance of Christian belief notwithstanding, Plantinga’s proposals are an essential contribution to contemporary religious epistemology, and for those who want to engage with them *Knowledge and Christian Belief* is a good place to start, if not to finish.

Turning now more briefly to J. L. Schellenberg’s *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy’s New Challenge to Belief in God*, there is an interesting similarity to *Knowledge and Christian Belief* but with a diametrically opposed intellectual framework and religious motivation. In 1993—the same year that Plantinga published the first two volumes of his *Warrant* trilogy—Schellenberg published his own first book, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*.<sup>12</sup> While it took about a decade for the conversation to gather speed, this book ultimately became one of the most influential and widely discussed volumes in contemporary philosophy of religion, generating a huge secondary literature of both books and articles.<sup>13</sup> Twenty-two years later Schellenberg thus published *The Hiddenness Argument* as a shorter and less technical presentation of his claims in order to reach a broader audience, answer objections, and update his argument in light of further analysis and critique.

Schellenberg’s basic claim is that “the existence of God invites our belief less strongly than it would in a world created by God. In many places and times, and for many people, God’s existence has

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<sup>11</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 244 n8; *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 54–55 n13.

<sup>12</sup> J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> For Schellenberg’s bibliography of most of this material see the seven-page appendix, “Recent Work on Divine Hiddenness,” in *The Hiddenness Argument* (133–139).

been rather less than a clear fact, and according to the hiddenness argument, this is a reason to suppose that it is not a fact at all.”<sup>14</sup> Or, as he put it earlier in *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, “the weakness of evidence for theism . . . is itself evidence against it” and so “we can argue from the reasonableness of nonbelief to the non-existence of God.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, unless the existence of God is manifestly evident to anyone who looks into the matter with a sincere desire to know the truth, God is not hidden—God does not exist. It is important to note that, in explicit opposition to Plantinga, Schellenberg thus appeals to the “evidentialist” objection to theistic belief: to be rational, belief in God must be supported by evidence, argument, or religious experience. It is also important to note that Schellenberg offers what he believes to be a valid deductive argument *against* the existence of God—that is, an argument that should compel the assent of anyone who agrees with its premises.<sup>16</sup>

The precise formulation of the argument has varied over the years and contexts, and the main text of *The Hiddenness Argument* now offers the following:

- (1) If a perfectly loving God exists, then there exists a God who is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person.
- (2) If there exists a God who is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person, then no finite person is ever non-resistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.
- (3) If a perfectly loving God exists, then no finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists (from 1 and 2).
- (4) Some finite persons are or have been nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.
- (5) No perfectly loving God exists (from 3 and 4).
- (6) If no perfectly loving God exists, then God does not exist.
- (7) God does not exist (from 5 and 6).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, vii.

<sup>15</sup> Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, 2–3.

<sup>16</sup> Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, 87–88, 104–105.

<sup>17</sup> Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, 103.

I will come back to the argument itself in a moment, but let me first observe that two interesting features of this volume are (i) Schellenberg's overtly atheistic apologetic intentions and (ii) the amount of autobiographical detail provided. As for (i), Schellenberg really wants to convince his readers not just of the *de jure* objection that Plantinga focuses on, namely that religious belief is irrational, but of the *de facto* objection as well: God does not exist. As for (ii), at various points in the volume Schellenberg describes his upbringing in a "deeply religious household" in Manitoba, his previous work as an "associate pastor of a Mennonite Church," and his "powerful theistic religious experiences" before a combination of "biblical criticism and philosophical argumentation" led ultimately to the abandonment of his former Christian commitments and embrace of atheism instead.<sup>18</sup> Thus, having chastised Plantinga for his "anti-HBC polemic," I must in fairness note that for some people such biblical scholarship is indeed a defeater for religious belief, as of course is philosophical critique.

So what about Schellenberg's argument? If it is a valid deductive argument then one indeed cannot accept the premises without accepting the conclusion. If so, anyone who wishes to be both logical and religious must reject one or more of the premises. And in fact we find that the premises are loaded with various claims that Schellenberg devotes much time and space to defending. As he rightly says, even if the argument is structurally simple, it "requires complicated discussion."<sup>19</sup> For the stated premises to be compelling, one needs also to agree with Schellenberg's detailed intuitions about what it means for God to be "perfectly loving" and what such love entails in regard to "personal relationship," and so on. (One of the ironies of Schellenberg's atheism is that he seems to have retained a pietistic view of God even in rejecting it.) I would thus reject premise (2) because I do not think that a loving God is required to ensure that "no finite person is *ever* nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists" (emphasis added). And having rejected a premise, the conclusion no longer follows. Schellenberg would of course come back and say that I have rejected premise (2) only because I have not fully considered his arguments about what perfect love entails, which then invites a further response—but such is philosophy.

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<sup>18</sup> See, in particular, Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, 35–36, 115.

<sup>19</sup> Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, 115.

Both of the books being reviewed in depth introduce readers to perhaps the two most important topics of debate in contemporary religious epistemology: Plantinga's extended Aquinas/Calvin model and Schellenberg's hiddenness argument. Both books are useful and accessible and succeed in their aim of presenting the authors' earlier and more technical work for a broader audience. Neither expresses an Anglican view of these matters, which would place more emphasis on church and tradition than Plantinga and less emphasis on deductive arguments than Schellenberg: the Anglican tradition of epistemology typically relies more on analogical and cumulative reasoning. Both books are worth reading, and *Knowledge and Christian Belief* is a helpful overview of Plantinga's position, but it is perhaps more immediately vital for readers to engage with and respond to the challenge of *The Hiddenness Argument*.