

§ 4. Excursus on Natural Theology

Lecture 4

Defeaters of Properly Basic Beliefs

Last time I argued that belief in God and in the great truths of the Gospel are properly basic beliefs, not only with respect to rationality, but also with respect to warrant through the witness of the Holy Spirit. So by means of the Spirit's witness we can be said to know that God exists and that these great things of the Gospel are true. Today we come to a very important question that I've been postponing for the last two weeks, and this is the question of defeaters of properly basic beliefs.

Plantinga emphasizes that the proper basicity of belief in God does not imply its indefeasibility. That is to say this belief is defeatable – it can be defeated by other incompatible beliefs which come to be accepted by the theist. If a theist comes to accept beliefs which are incompatible with his belief in God then he has a kind of cognitive dissonance, and in order to remain rational he is going to have to give up some of his beliefs, and perhaps it will be his belief in God that he will give up in order to maintain his rationality. So, for example, imagine a Christian who is confronted with the problem of evil against the existence of God. He is confronted with a potential defeater of his Christian belief in God. If he is to remain rational in his beliefs, he is going to have to have a defeater of this defeater of his Christian beliefs – a sort of defeater-defeater if you will. This is where Christian apologetics can come in; it can help to formulate answers to these potential defeaters. For example, the Free Will Defense could be a way of defeating the problem of evil.

But Plantinga also argues that in some cases the original belief itself may so exceed its alleged defeater in warrant that it actually becomes an intrinsic defeater of its ostensible defeater. He gives the very interesting example of someone who has been accused of a crime which he knows that he did not commit, and yet a person against whom all the evidence is stacked. So if a jury of his peers simply went on the basis of the evidence they should convict him and find him guilty. Plantinga points out that such a person is not rationally obligated to follow the evidence to where it leads because he knows that he is innocent, and he knows that in a properly basic way. There is no need for him to give up that properly basic belief and to agree with his peers that he is, in fact, guilty. The belief that he did not commit the crime intrinsically defeats the defeaters brought against it by the evidence.

Plantinga makes the theological application by suggesting that belief in God may similarly intrinsically defeat all of the defeaters that are brought against it. Plantinga suggests that the circumstances which could produce such a powerful warrant for belief in God are the implanted, natural sense of God that he believes God has placed in our

hearts, as well as the testimony or the witness of the Holy Spirit which deepens and accentuates this inborn, innate sense of God.

Should a conflict arise between the witness of the Holy Spirit to the fundamental truths of the Christian faith and beliefs that are based on argument and evidence, then it is the former that must take precedence over the latter, rather than vice versa.

This is exactly in line with what I described last week as Martin Luther's claim that only the ministerial use of reason is valid and legitimate.¹ Reason is not permitted to stand like a magistrate and judge the truth of the Gospel message. It is a minister of the Gospel message and submits to and serves it. So belief in God and the great things of the Gospel vouchsafed to us by the witness of the Holy Spirit and are intrinsic defeaters of any alleged defeaters that might be brought against them.

Some people would disagree with this. They would say, no, reason can be used in a magisterial role, at least by the unbeliever who hasn't yet come to know Christ and is exploring which religious system to believe. They will ask how else could you determine which one is true, the Bible, the Qur'an, or the Book of Mormon, unless we use argument and evidence to judge these? The Muslim or the Mormon also claims to have an inner witness of God's Spirit or a "burning in the bosom" which authenticates to them the truth of their respective Scriptures. Christian claims to a subjective experience, they say, just seem to be on a par with similar non-Christian claims.

How might we respond to this objection? As I already intimated in previous lessons, it seems to me that the fact that other persons claim to have a witness of the Holy Spirit or burning in the bosom does nothing to defeat the belief that a person who genuinely has the witness of the Holy Spirit to the truths of his faith. The existence of an authentic and unique witness of the Holy Spirit does not exclude in any way that there could be people who make false claims to such a thing. If that is the case, how does the existence of false claims to a witness of the Holy Spirit in favor of a non-Christian religion do anything logically to undermine the fact that the Christian believer does possess the actual and authentic witness of the Holy Spirit? Why should I be robbed of my joy and my assurance of salvation simply because somebody else falsely pretends, either sincerely or insincerely, to the Spirit's witness? If a Mormon or a Muslim falsely claims to experience the witness of God's Spirit in his heart to the truth of the Qur'an or Book of Mormon, that does nothing (it seems to me) to undermine the veridicality of my experience.

But someone might insist at this point, "But how do you know that *your* experience isn't also as spurious as theirs?" That question has already been answered: the experience of the Spirit's witness is self-authenticating for him who really has it. The Spirit-filled

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Christian can know immediately that his claim to the Spirit's witness is true despite the presence of false claims made by other persons adhering to other religions.

When you are confronted with a Mormon or a Muslim or an adherent to some other faith claiming to know in a properly basic way that their faith is true, you can simply begin to share with that person defeaters of that person's belief. Share with them objections to the Qur'an or objections to the historical veracity of the Book of Mormon, for example. As you share these defeaters with them, do so prayerfully trusting that God will use them to break down their false confidence because they don't really have an authentic witness of the Holy Spirit. They don't have a self-authenticating experience. They are misled by some sort of counterfeit experience. So the defeaters that you share with them will not be intrinsically defeated by their belief. They may break through and help to convince that person. Don't ever forget that while you share these defeaters the Holy Spirit is also quietly at work bearing genuine witness to that person's heart to the truth of the Gospel. He can remain a non-Christian only by ignoring and resisting the conviction and the drawing of God's Spirit upon his heart.² Don't be cowed by false claims to a self-authenticating witness of the Holy Spirit. Rather, when you confront such a person, share with them defeaters for their belief and pray for them that God's Spirit would convict their hearts and draw them to him.

START DISCUSSION

Student: You have debated innumerable skeptics and folks who don't believe in God. You and Plantinga are willing to stand up in front of multitudes and talk about it. How would you describe their unwillingness to accept the Spirit?

Dr. Craig: I think, quite candidly, for many of the folks that I've debated it is very evident that their unbelief is not based on argument and evidence because so many of them prove to be so incapable, frankly, of defending their own worldview when challenged or refuting the arguments and evidence for the existence of God or the truth of Christianity. It seems very evident that if they really followed the evidence to where it leads they would be shaken at least, if not change their minds. But I think that for many of them there is just a deep-seated commitment to the truth of either naturalism or at least the falsity of Christianity. Some of them have been quite candid about this. I remember, for example, the Canadian humanist and abortionist Henry Morgantaler saying in the debates that I've had with him that even if God were to appear to him and show himself to be true, Morgantaler said, *I still would not bow the knee to him. I would prefer to go to hell than to bow the knee to God and worship him.* It was just a deep, deep moral rejection of God on his part.

Student: This is also true in religions outside of Christianity. One of my experiences with the orthodox rabbis is – some of them have even said if Jesus were to descend in all of his glory from heaven, I would not bow the knee to him.

Dr. Craig: Wow. I think when you reached a point like that with a person you should not feel discouraged in one sense. You have actually, I think, done all that apologetics can do. Because what you've done is you've removed any intellectual excuse for unbelief and exposed unbelief for what it really is – just a deep hardened heart and determination of the will not to believe on any basis.

Student: I love movies and I love connecting movies with apologetics. I was thinking about the movie *Contact* when it comes to this. That last scene with Jodie Foster – would that be a good example of a properly basic belief where she is standing before everyone and they are saying, *You have no proof. You have no evidence. Don't you admit the possibility you could be hallucinating all of this?* At the end she says, *Yes, but I can't deny though that it really happened because everything in me tells me that it was real.*³ Would that be a good example?

Dr. Craig: It is a wonderful example from contemporary cinema. I really liked that movie *Contact*. When she has this cosmic vision of the essence of the universe or whatever, she cries, *I never knew! I never knew!* The truth of this just crashes in on her. Then, as you say, all the evidence is against her, at least until very near the end when I think they find the 18 minutes missing of time. But even apart from that. Say she didn't have that evidence that finally does materialize at the end; for her this was a properly basic belief grounded in this experience that simply, intrinsically defeated the evidence that was brought against her by people who had never had such an experience and were telling her it was delusory. If you've not seen the movie *Contact* I would encourage you to watch it and think of it in terms of properly basic beliefs and intrinsic defeaters of defeaters. Good example.

Student: I think for a lot of these skeptics it is a belief in an anti-religion. It is an anti-belief rather than a belief. This is what they embrace.⁴

Dr. Craig: I think that is a good point. You especially see that with agnostics who really don't have a positive belief system. It is not as though they are committed to any sort of alternative. But they are committed, as you say, to the falsity of Christianity – that this is not allowed to be true.

Student: As a corollary, I heard somebody comment that you can address a critic but you can't address a cynic. If somebody is cynical, they are really not interested in what is true or evidence or anything like that.

³ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DVn90-83NQQ#t=1m23s> (accessed September 6, 2015).

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Dr. Craig: That does require sensitivity when you are talking to a person whether or not this is a conversation that is worth having. Because there are people who are searching and who will respond to the evidence and argument. We get wonderful emails every week from people like this. What we are talking about here is someone who, to the end of his life, stalwartly resists the drawing and convicting of the Holy Spirit. That person will not be able to stand before God and have a just excuse because the evidence and arguments that he had weren't adequate.

END DISCUSSION

Let's continue. I think that the most plausible spin that a person could put on this objection, if we want to press forward the discussion a notch, would be to say that false claims to a witness of the Holy Spirit ought to undermine my confidence in the reliability of the cognitive faculties which form religious beliefs, because those faculties evidently so often mislead people. You see so many false religions in the world, it would seem you just can't have any confidence in the cognitive faculties that lead to religious beliefs because by your own admission most people have false beliefs as a result of these faculties. The fact that so many people apparently sincerely, but falsely, believe that God's Spirit is testifying to them of the truth of their religion ought to make us leery about our own experience of God. Why should we trust our experience when we think that everybody else's experience is untrustworthy?

I think there are at least two things wrong with this statement or construal of the objection. First, as Christians we don't need to say that every non-Christian religious experience is simply spurious – that it is totally invalid. It may well be the case that adherents of other religions do enjoy a veridical experience of God in certain respects. For example, maybe in pantheistic religions the experience of God as the Ground of Being upon whom we contingent creatures depend moment by moment for our existence. Or maybe in certain religions an experience of God as the Moral Absolute from whom moral duties and values derive. Or even a religious experience of God as the loving Father of mankind. We don't need to say that all of these experiences of God are just spurious. We are not committed to saying that the cognitive faculties which are responsible for people's religious beliefs are fundamentally unreliable.

Secondly, the objection unjustifiably assumes that the witness of the Holy Spirit is the product of human cognitive faculties or that it is indistinguishable from the products of human cognitive faculties. That is simply not true. It is just a sociological fact that non-Christian religious experience, such as Buddhist or Hindu religious experience, is typically very different from Christian experience. Why should I think that when a Mormon says that he has a "burning in the bosom" that the Book of Mormon is true that this is qualitatively indistinguishable from the witness of the Holy Spirit that I

experience? I don't see any reason to think that these non-veridical religious experiences that people have are qualitatively indistinguishable from the witness of the Holy Spirit. One way to get evidence of this fact would be to just simply ask converts from those other religions to Christianity if their experience is any different now.⁵ Ask the ex-Mormons or ex-Muslims who have become Christians, "Is your experience of God now different than when you were a Mormon or a Muslim?" I think in most cases they will say absolutely it is different. They've come to know God in a different personal way. It is simply not correct to say that the witness of the Holy Spirit is indistinguishable from these counterfeit religious experiences.

Somebody might say (and I've heard it said), "But hasn't it been said that neuroscientists can artificially stimulate the brain to have religious experiences which are obviously non-veridical and yet they are like the witness of the Holy Spirit?" Maybe a brain scientist could stimulate your brain to make you think you have a witness of the Holy Spirit to the truth of Christianity. Again, as a factual matter, that is simply not true. The sort of religious experiences that neuroscientists have been able to artificially induce by brain stimuli are more akin to pantheistic religious experiences, like in Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism – a sort of sense of oneness with the All where you lose your personal identity in the All, the totality of everything, the Absolute. They are not like Christian experiences of God's personal presence and love. So it is simply not true that neuroscientists have been able to induce anything like the witness of the Holy Spirit in people.

But more importantly, more fundamentally than that, the fact that a non-veridical experience can be induced which is qualitatively identical to a veridical experience does absolutely nothing to undermine the fact that there are veridical experiences and that we are rational in taking those experiences to be veridical. Otherwise, you would have to say that because neuroscientists can induce in your brain experiences of seeing an object or having a hallucination of something, that therefore your five senses are utterly unreliable and you should never trust them when you do see an object. Just because a neurologist can artificially stimulate your brain to make you think that you are having an experience of some object is no reason at all to doubt that when you are not under such artificial stimulus that your experiences of such objects are not veridical. Similarly, even if a scientist could artificially stimulate my brain to make me think I am having an experience of God does nothing to undermine the veridicality of my experience of God when I am not under artificial stimulus from a neuroscientist.

So the objection to a self-authenticating witness of the Spirit on the basis of these sorts of false claims to such an experience does not undermine my rationally trusting in the deliverances of the Holy Spirit and his testimony to the existence of God and the great truths of the Gospel.

⁵ 20:05

START DISCUSSION

Student: I know you use the term “self-authenticating.” But doesn’t the Bible tell us to test the spirits with his Word? So in essence it is not self-authenticating. It may be self-actualizing in that I experienced it, but am I not supposed to test that experience or that vision with the Word of God?

Dr. Craig: I think you may not have been here about three weeks ago when we looked at the New Testament data concerning the witness of the Holy Spirit because I dealt with that passage in 1 John where 1 John 4:1 says, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.” What I argued – and I feel very confident of this – is that John is not encouraging people to test in this way the witness of the Holy Spirit in their own hearts. He is talking about false prophets who come to them claiming to speak in the name of God’s Spirit. You need to test those prophets to see whether they are genuinely speaking from God.⁶ He talks about such persons in 1 John 2 – *They went out from us but they are not really of us.* There are these counterfeit claims out there, and I would say people who claim the burning of the bosom for Mormonism would be an example of such a false spirit. It needs to be tested. But there is nothing in John that would suggest that we test the witness of the Holy Spirit to the truth of the Gospel. On the contrary, everything John says about that is that it teaches us and leads us into all truth, it exceeds the testimony of men, it is the testimony of God himself, and gives us assurance and confidence that our faith is true.

Student: So you are saying that I could be delusional and I am still not supposed to test it?

Dr. Craig: No. What I am saying is . . . OK, you need to go back and look at the notes on this, what I said about what it means to be self-authenticating. I said that for a person who does have a genuine witness of the Holy Spirit, that person cannot be deluded. It is unmistakable. It is, as I say, a self-authenticating witness. You can be deluded like a Mormon or a Muslim and think you have such an experience; that is true. But the person who has a veridical experience of God’s Spirit can’t be mistaken about that.

Student: I remember I went through that path of looking at Buddhism, Taoism, and the like. I remember waking up. I knew I was asleep because I remember waking up. I woke up when I heard God’s Word. That experience in that sense was self-authenticating, but the experience came through God’s Word. What I am not hearing – may be I am just not getting it – what role does God’s Word play in assuring us that what we have self-authenticated is, in fact, veridical and not a delusion.

Dr. Craig: OK. Plantinga has a lot to say about God’s Word. What I said is that the Holy Spirit bears witness to the great truths of the Gospel. So how do we find out what those truths are? Well, they are in God’s Word. So God’s Word is the medium by which we

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learn these truths, and then it is the Spirit that bears witness to that truth. Just like in your experience! You heard this, and I am sure it impressed itself upon you somehow as true, that this is really the Word of God that is speaking to me. The assurance doesn't come from the Word. It comes from the Holy Spirit who bears witness to that Word. The Word is what gives you the content. It is the medium. But then it is God's own Spirit that bears testimony to the truth of that. That is why the proclamation of the Gospel and the Word of God is so important because it will be the medium by which we will learn about these truths that the Spirit bears witness to.

END DISCUSSION

Let me proceed to suggest two theological reasons why I think that those Christians who do support the magisterial use of reason are mistaken. These are now two reasons why I would reject the magisterial use of reason.

First, such a role would consign most Christians to irrationality. Think about it. The vast majority of the human race have neither the time, nor the training, nor the library resources to develop a full-blown Christian apologetic as the basis of their faith. Even the proponents of the magisterial use of reason were at one time early in their education still presumably lacking such an apologetic. According to the magisterial use of reason, these people should not have believed in Christ until they had finished their apologetic. Otherwise, they would be believing for insufficient reasons. I remember when I was a seminary student at Trinity, I asked one of my classmates, "How do you know that Christianity is true?" He said to me, "I really don't know." Does that mean that he should have been a non-Christian at that point? That he should reject Christ out of his life until he can come up with an answer to that question? I think obviously not! He knew Christianity was true because he knew Jesus, even though he had not yet worked out some sort of an apologetic for the Christian faith.⁷ The fact is that we can know the truth whether we have rational arguments or not. The vast majority of Christians throughout the world and down through history have never been in a position where they could justify their Christian beliefs in a rational way through argument and evidence. I think it was last week that someone said that if God just abandoned us to work out by our own reason whether or not he exists then getting into heaven would be like getting into Harvard. I thought that was so apropos.

The second reason I want to give for rejecting the magisterial use of reason, is that if the magisterial use of reason were legitimate, then a person who had been given poor arguments for Christianity would have a just excuse for not believing in God. Imagine somebody who had been given an invalid argument for God's existence. Could that person stand before God on the Judgment Day and say, "God, those Christians only gave

⁷ 30:06

me this lousy invalid argument for believing in you. That's why I didn't believe"? No! The Bible says that all men are without excuse. That is in the book of Romans. Even those who are given no good reason to believe and many good reasons not to believe are ultimately without excuse, because the ultimate reason that they do not believe is because they deliberately reject the testimony of God's own Holy Spirit to the great truths of the Gospel or to God's existence.

So it seems to me that the role of rational argumentation in knowing Christianity to be true is again the role of a servant. A person knows that Christianity is true fundamentally because the Holy Spirit tells him that it is true, and while argument and evidence can be used to confirm this truth, it cannot legitimately be used to defeat it or override it. The witness of the Holy Spirit is an intrinsic defeater of any defeaters that are brought against it.

I might just say here that I don't see any reason to think that God can't increase the witness or intensity of his Holy Spirit's witness as need be. It may well be that the witness of the Holy Spirit that you have right now may not seem sufficient to overcome great defeaters against the Christian faith, but it is sufficient for you right now. But imagine a student, say, raised in the old Soviet Union and indoctrinated with Marxist propaganda throughout his schooling and his university career. In order for that person to believe and intrinsically defeat the defeaters brought against him, God may intensify the witness of the Holy Spirit to a degree that is far beyond what you or I experience here. In other words the witness of the Holy Spirit can vary in its intensity relative to the circumstances and the needs. What God won't permit is for a person to be in a situation where the rational thing for him to do is to apostatize, reject Christ or not be a believer, and be an atheist or agnostic – a non-Christian.

Even if the witness of the Holy Spirit in your life may not seem powerful enough to defeat every defeater, it may well be the case for those who are confronted with very powerful defeaters that they would experience a more intense witness of the Holy Spirit that will be sufficient for their perseverance in the faith.

That leads us finally to step three of the argument:

3. Therefore, belief that the biblical God exists may be rationally accepted as a basic belief not grounded on argument.

I would just add, as we've seen, that that properly basic belief is properly basic not only with regard to rationality but also with respect to warrant so that we can be said to know on the basis of the Holy Spirit's witness that God exists and the great truths of the Gospel are indeed true.⁸

⁸ Total Running Time: 35:35 (Copyright © 2015 William Lane Craig)