Abstract: A central theme in the Christian contemplative tradition is that knowing God is much more like "unknowing than it is like possessing rationally acceptable beliefs. Knowledge of God is expressed, in this tradition, in metaphors of woundedness, darkness, silence, suffering, and desire. Philosophers of religion, on the other hand, tend to explore the possibilities of knowing God in terms of rational acceptability, epistemic rights, cognitive responsibility, and propositional belief. These languages seem to point to very different accounts of how it is that we come to know God, and a very different range of critical concepts by which the truth of such knowledge can be assessed. In this paper, I begin to explore what might be at stake in these different languages of knowing God, drawing particularly on Alvin Plantinga's epistemology of Christian belief. I will argue that his is a distorted account of the epistemology of Christian belief, and that this has implications for his project of demonstrating the rational acceptability of Christian faith for the 21st century.

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Christian faith has its beginnings in an experience of profound contradictoriness, an experience that so questioned the religious categories of its time that the resulting organization of religious language was a centuries-long task. At one level, indeed, it is a task that every generation has to undertake again ... The question involved here is not our interrogation of the data, but its interrogation of us. It is the intractable strangeness of the ground of belief that must constantly be allowed to challenge the fixed assumptions of religiosity; it is a given, whose question to each succeeding age is fundamentally one and the same. And the greatness of the great Christian saints lies in their readiness to be questioned, judged, stripped naked and left speechless by that which lies at the center of their faith.1


The claim that the greatness of the saints should lie in their readiness to ‘be questioned, judged, stripped naked and left speechless’ by what lies at the centre of their faith appears to sit uneasily with, at the very least, the language concerning knowledge of God which is employed by some Christian philosophers of religion. Alvin Plantinga, for example, writes at the beginning of *Warranted Christian Belief* that his book is ‘about the intellectual or rational acceptability of Christian belief’, 2 particularly for ‘educated and intelligent people living in the twenty-first century’.3 Christian faith, on his account, is a ‘cognitive activity’, which involves believing the proposition that God has arranged a scheme of salvation and that that scheme applies to me.4 Demonstrating the ‘intellectual or rational acceptability’ of faith in that proposition means, according to Plantinga, showing that the believer is ‘within his epistemic rights, is not irresponsible, [and] is violating no epistemic or other duties in holding that belief in that way’.5

I am not for the moment claiming that the faith of which Williams’s speaks and the faith whose rational acceptability Plantinga is concerned to defend are incompatible. But what strikes me is how dissociated the language of the philosophers seems to be from the

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language of faith.\textsuperscript{6} Those who speak from within the tradition of Christian spirituality tend to speak of the knowledge of God in terms of woundedness, darkness, silence, unknowing, suffering and desire.\textsuperscript{7} The philosophers of religion speak of rational acceptability, epistemic rights, cognitive responsibility, and propositional belief. These languages seem to point to a vastly different account of how it is that we come to know God, and a vastly different range of critical concepts by which the ‘truth’ of such knowledge can be assessed.

In this paper, my aim is to begin to explore what might be at stake in these different accounts of knowing God. I am going to focus on the work of Alvin Plantinga for two reasons. First, as a Reformed epistemologist, Plantinga’s exploration of the rationality of Christian belief might seem likely at first glance to be more attuned to the internal logic of Christian understanding than, say, the evidentialist approach of someone like Richard Swinburne.\textsuperscript{8} Second, as a philosophical friend of Christianity, Alvin Plantinga claims not only to have developed an epistemological argument to show that Christian belief may be rationally held, but also to have given a compelling account of how in fact Christians come to have knowledge of God. As he puts it, his project is on the one hand, ‘an exercise in apologetics and philosophy of religion’, designed to demonstrate the failure of a range of objections to Christian belief. On the other hand, he says, it is ‘an exercise in Christian philosophy ... [providing] a good way for Christians to think about the epistemology of Christian belief, in particular the question whether and how Christian belief has warrant’.\textsuperscript{9}

I think that there are a number of significant problems with Plantinga’s account of the epistemology of Christian belief and that these problems are shown up particularly clearly in the light of the epistemology of much of the Christian spiritual, and particularly the contemplative, tradition.\textsuperscript{10} In this first part of my paper, I will sketch an outline of Plantinga’s account, before identifying what I believe are some of its major difficulties. In the last part of the paper, I will consider the effect of these difficulties on Plantinga’s

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{6} This dissociation of the language of philosophy of religion from the language of faith has been noted by D.Z. Phillips in a number of works, including \textit{Religion and Friendly Fire: Examining Assumptions in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion} (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2004) and also by Grace M. Jantzen, \textit{Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).
\item \textsuperscript{7} There is a vast range of works that could be cited here. In addition to Williams, \textit{Wound of Knowledge}, see for example works such as St Augustine, \textit{Confessions}, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961); Anon. 14th Century, \textit{The Cloud of Unknowing}, ed. William Johnston (New York: Image Books Doubleday, 1996); \textit{Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and the Incarnation}, ed. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
\item \textsuperscript{8} For a summary criticism of the evidentialist approach to philosophy of religion, see Clark, \textit{Return to Reason}.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Plantinga, \textit{Warranted Christian Belief}, p.xiii.
\item \textsuperscript{10} I am aware that to speak of such a thing as ‘the Christian spiritual tradition’ is much too sweeping a category. However, my intention is to draw on what I hope are widely recognised and authoritative elements of the tradition in order to highlight weaknesses in Plantinga’s philosophical account of the epistemology of Christian belief.
\end{itemize}
underlying project of demonstrating the rational acceptability of Christian belief.

**Knowing God**

Plantinga develops a model for the epistemology of Christian belief in a two stage argument. The model, which he calls the ‘Aquinas/Calvin’ or ‘A/C model’, purports to establish, in the first instance, grounds for warranted belief in God, or warranted theistic belief, and only secondly provides grounds for there being warranted Christian belief.

Plantinga famously rejects the notion that rational belief in God is based on there being sufficient evidence for the proposition that God exists. That would be to treat belief in God as if it were of the same class as belief in a scientific hypothesis. Rather, for Plantinga, belief in God resembles belief in other minds. It does not require argument or evidence but, like belief in other persons, arises immediately under certain circumstances. Just as we perceive or understand ‘immediately’ that another person has a mind like ours and is not a robot, so we may recognise or perceive that God exists.¹¹

How does such basic belief in God arise? According to the A/C model, human beings possess such a thing as a cognitive faculty which naturally tends to produce belief in God. Plantinga calls this faculty, following Calvin, the sensus divinitatis. The sensus divinitatis is particularly responsive to certain circumstances, such as experiences of awe and wonder at the starry skies above, and these are the circumstances that tend to occasion the production of belief in God. ‘If we wish to think in terms of the overworked functional analogy’, Plantinga remarks, ‘we can think of the sensus divinitatis ... as an input-output device: it takes the circumstances mentioned above as input and issues as output theistic beliefs, beliefs about God’.¹² The beliefs that are produced in this way are ‘basic beliefs’. They are not inferred on the basis of facts or other beliefs, and it is not that the starry skies above provide evidence for belief in God. Rather, the sensus divinitatis acts in the same kind of way as perception, memory or a priori belief.¹³ As Plantinga puts it:

> It isn’t that one beholds the night sky, notes that it is grand, and concludes that there must be such a person as God … It is rather that, upon the perception of the night sky or the mountain vista or the tiny flower, these beliefs just arise within us. They are occasioned by the circumstances; they are not conclusions from them.¹⁴

If, however, there is such a thing as the sensus divinitatis which naturally produces

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¹¹ See the summary of Plantinga’s ‘Reason and Belief in God’ cited in Clark, *Return to Reason*, p.119.
belief in God, the question of why belief in God seems so often difficult or problematic arises. Here, Plantinga says, we must invoke the explanatory power of sin. Our problem is that the cognitive faculty which is the *sensus divinitatis* has been diseased, compromised, and weakened by the effects of sin so that it can no longer function as it is designed to do.\textsuperscript{15} On this model, Plantinga asserts, far from the rationality of religious believers being suspect, it is in fact ‘the unbeliever who displays epistemic malfunction; failing to believe in God is a result of some kind of dysfunction of the *sensus divinitatis*’.\textsuperscript{16}

Even for the believer, however, the *sensus divinitatis* is fatally compromised. None of us any longer know God as fully and gloriously as we were designed to and, even worse, we resist even the faint deliverances of the *sensus divinitatis* that remain. God’s response to this situation of ignorance, blindness and disobedience is to arrange, as Plantinga puts it, for our salvation, restoring us to God’s fellowship and repairing the image of God, including the *sensus divinitatis*, within us.\textsuperscript{17} Necessary to this whole plan of rescue and restoration is that we human beings should be informed of it. According to the model, the way that God chose to inform us was first, by causing the Scriptures to be produced, and second, by sending the Holy Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit in us is both affective, repairing our disobedient wills, and cognitive, giving us the ‘firm and certain knowledge’ that is faith.

Plantinga says:

*In giving us faith, the Holy Spirit enables us to see the truth of the main lines of the Christian gospel as set forth in the Scripture. The internal invitation of the Holy Spirit is therefore a source of belief, a cognitive process that produces in us belief in the main lines of the Christian story. ... [I]f they are held with sufficient firmness, these beliefs qualify as knowledge ...*.\textsuperscript{18}

As I noted earlier, Plantinga’s depiction of the process by which knowledge of God arises through the work of the ‘belief-producing mechanism’\textsuperscript{19} called the Holy Spirit is not obviously related to the process of being ‘stripped naked and left speechless’ by our encounter with what lies at the centre of faith. In fact, I will argue that his account tends to distort our understanding of what faith most fundamentally is, how it arises and how it is related to the life of the believing subject. That in turn has implications for identifying the

\textsuperscript{15} Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p.184.

\textsuperscript{16} Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p.184. Stephen Davis makes this claim in a particularly strong, not to say judgemental, way in his *Christian Philosophical Theology*, p.12f. D.Z. Phillips points out the spiritual danger of such an epistemological ‘explanation’ for unbelief: ‘There is the danger of phariseeism: “I thank thee that my faculties, unlike those of others, are working properly”.’ See his *Religion and Friendly Fire*, p.17.

\textsuperscript{17} Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p.205.


\textsuperscript{19} Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p.256.
critical concepts by which its truth may be assessed. I want to begin to defend this large cluster of claims by considering in a bit more detail the contrasts between Plantinga’s account of the epistemology of Christian belief and the language of the Christian theological and spiritual tradition. I will consider in turn his account of the work of the Holy Spirit, the relationship between faith and the life of the believer and, finally, the nature of the propositional truths of faith.

**Holy Spirit as cognitive device**

In theology it is notoriously difficult to speak of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is called the ‘shy’ member of the Trinity and, from the earliest days of the church, theologians have struggled over questions of the Spirit’s personhood, divinity and distinctive role.\(^20\) Now is not the time to go into these questions in any depth. I want, however, to contrast the way that Plantinga speaks of the Spirit as an ‘extraordinary’ cognitive device,\(^21\) with the theological understanding of the Spirit as the third person of the Trinity.

In the Christian tradition, the nature of God is understood to be revealed pre-eminently through the person and work of Jesus. That nature is fundamentally understood as *kenotic* or self-emptying. That is, the nature of God is that God gives God’s self away. In the context of Christology, the great statement of Jesus’s self-emptying is made in Philippians 2:

> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.

This understanding is intrinsic to the revelation of God as Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity expresses the radically new recognition that the being of God consists of the eternal self-giving of persons in relation, the personhood of Father, Son and Spirit being realised in the very giving away of being to the other. This is one of the hard won ‘reorganisations’ of religious language of which my opening quotation from Rowan Williams spoke. What it means is that the person of the Holy Spirit, as much as the person of Jesus, is ‘christoform’.

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The Spirit exists in the movement of self-giving, death and being given being from another, which is resurrection.

How does the Holy Spirit, on this understanding, bring us to knowledge of God? Knowledge of God, which is salvation, is coming to share in this dynamic of God’s being. The Holy Spirit is the person who acts to bring us into this relationship, this dynamic. In the New Testament, as the theologian Eugene Rogers has put it, the Spirit is that which moves human beings ‘from being exterior to being interior to the trinitarian life’.22 That is, Rogers continues:

Everything that Jesus undertakes and undergoes changes the relation of the human being to the Trinity, because in him God is reconciling the world to Godself. As a gift to the Son, the Spirit is constantly incorporating observers ... into the trinitarian life, moving them from an external to an internal relation, teaching them to say “Father”, to take on the identity of the Son, to join in the Spirit’s own celebration.23

I am conscious that to those for whom this language and understanding is alien, what I am saying will sound like Martian. We are here facing the difficulty of moving between philosophical and theological argument about such matters, and the difficulty of determining the criteria for meaningful speech. I am going to return to this issue towards the end of the paper. For now, the main point I want to emphasise is the fundamental distinction between conceiving of the Holy Spirit’s role in bringing us to knowledge of God primarily in terms of belief-production, and conceiving of that role primarily in terms of bringing us into relationship. It will be clear that the relationship between the believer’s life and the process of coming to faith, coming to knowledge of God, looks quite different from these two perspectives.

The believer’s life

As I noted earlier, Plantinga writes that ‘Christian belief is “revealed to our minds” by way of the Holy Spirit’s inducing, in us, belief in the central message of Scripture’, and that ‘the activity of the Holy Spirit’ combined with the divinely inspired testimony of Scripture is ‘a belief-producing process or activity ... [I]t is a cognitive device, a means by which belief, and belief on a certain specific set of topics, is regularly produced in regular ways’.24 But this way of putting things makes it sound as though the mind of the believer is

24 Plantinga, Warranted Christian Belief, p.256.
just the site where the Holy Spirit happens to alight and to engage in belief-producing activity. The belief is ‘induced’ within us. It may indeed have consequences for us, but the process of coming to belief is external to the being, the biography, of the believer. It is as if the believer becomes the carrier of beliefs delivered or produced by the cognitive device that is the Holy Spirit. There seems to be here no recognition of much of the testimony of the Christian tradition concerning the struggle in belief, or the difficulty of the knowledge of God, which is intrinsic to coming into relationship with God.

Is this an unfair characterisation of Plantinga’s argument? It is true that Plantinga emphasises that the work of the Holy Spirit involves not simply the production of belief, but also the regeneration of our hearts and wills. He notes that there is a distinction between someone who believes that God exists, and someone who believes in and loves God. So, he says, the Holy Spirit works not just to give us intellectual knowledge of God, but for the ‘renewal and redirection of our affections’. Indeed he writes movingly of the longing, the eros, of human love for God, which is a reflection of God’s trinitarian and yearning love for humanity. So faith, he says:

is a matter of a sure and certain knowledge, both revealed to the mind and sealed to the heart. This sealing, according to the model, consists in the having of the right sorts of affections; in essence, it consists in loving God above all and one’s neighbor as oneself. There is an intimate relation between revealing and sealing, knowledge and affection, intellect and will; they cooperate in a deep and complex and intimate way in the person of faith.

It is clearly not the case then that, for Plantinga, faith is simply a matter of holding certain propositional beliefs. There is, nevertheless, something that makes me uneasy in the way that Plantinga articulates the relationship between the life of the believer and the process of coming to faith through the work of the Holy Spirit. The question is whether that unease reflects simply a difference in sensibility or terminology, or whether it points to a deeper issue.

At the root of my concern is the sense that Plantinga’s account of faith presupposes and leaves largely undisturbed the existence of an autonomous, self-contained, knowing subject which is, in some of the deepest understandings of the Christian spiritual tradition, precisely the self to which we must be in the process of dying if we are truly to know God. That is, on Plantinga’s model, it is as if the Holy Spirit acts upon modern, rational subjects,
to produce within us certain propositional beliefs and to reorient our wills and affections towards God. It appears to leave the knowing subject more or less the same, possessing merely a new deposit of beliefs and a new disposition to act. In the tradition of Christian spirituality out of which Rowan Williams writes, however, the faith of the New Testament is wrought in the life of the believer through participation in the self-emptying of the trinitarian life. This participation is painful, and necessarily reflects the dynamic of Christ’s suffering and death. Williams writes: ‘Our healing lies in obedient acceptance of God’s will; but this is no bland resignation. It is a change wrought by anguish, darkness and stripping. If we believe we can experience our healing without deepening our hurt, we have understood nothing of the roots of our faith’.  

There are two objections that might be made to this line of thought. First, it might be said that Williams’ depiction of what is involved in coming to faith is not evident in much ordinary Christian life. It is clearly true, I think, that Christians and Christian communities often fail to live out the radical depths of their vocation to conversion and transformation. Nevertheless, it is those recognised as saints whom the church acknowledges as the bearers of its own essential identity. The church recognises that the saints are the ones who are most faithfully and truthfully relating and responding to the reality of the God to whom all are answerable. That means that Williams’ depiction of the relationship between coming to faith and the life of the saint is in some sense normative for the Christian believer.

Second, it might be said that even if Plantinga’s model does not sufficiently acknowledge the difficulty or pain of the process of coming to and deepening faith, this does not mean that his account of the epistemology of Christian belief cannot accommodate it. There is a sense in which, presumably, Plantinga could add into his account an acknowledgement that, at least sometimes, the reorientation of the will and affections causes suffering or that being brought by the Holy Spirit to see that the ‘great truths of the gospel’ ‘are indeed true’ may be difficult or disorienting. But the problem is that this acknowledgement still seems to leave the suffering and difficulty external to, a possible consequence of, the process by which the love of God and belief in the truth of the gospel is actually brought about. Plantinga consistently speaks of the Holy Spirit as a kind of agency that acts on the cognitive and affective apparatus of individuals to induce faith. It is not necessary to his account that this work of the Holy Spirit requires or presupposes a certain

kind of openness or vulnerability in the self, even a process of surrender and cracking open of self-sufficiency. Faith is then something that the believer has or possesses, rather than a relationship into which the believer is caught up.

Again, it might be said that Plantinga’s epistemology of Christian belief is not incompatible with an account such as this. Perhaps he assumes that the self needs to be in a certain condition of vulnerability or openness in order for the Holy Spirit to act effectively upon its cognitive and affective faculties. But he does not make this explicit. And if his model can be developed without reference to this necessary dynamic of vulnerability and self-surrender, this leaves the self somehow fundamentally in control of what it comes to know, despite the talk of the external agency of the Holy Spirit. It seems to me that this dissociation of the being of the believer from the process of coming to faith in Plantinga’s account is a consequence of his conceiving the work of the Holy Spirit overwhelmingly in terms of belief production, rather than in terms of drawing us into relationship. And this, I suggest, distorts his epistemology of Christian belief. If that is right, then it is not clear that the propositional statements of belief in the Christian tradition can be understood in the way that Plantinga assumes.

The propositional statements of faith

Although Plantinga holds that faith in the Christian tradition cannot be understood only in terms of belief in a set of propositions, it is nevertheless true that Christians say that they believe certain things and they express those beliefs in terms (very often) of credal statements. ‘We believe in God, the Father Almighty’, and so on. Plantinga thinks that, at the least, to have faith involves believing certain propositions.31 I want to suggest, however, that Plantinga has misunderstood the grammar, to use a Wittgensteinian phrase, of the language of belief here, and that this has significant consequences for his sense of the critical concepts to which the ‘knowledge’ of God is answerable. His misunderstanding shows itself in part in his neglect of the relationship between belief and the practices of Christian life, and the consequent awkwardness of his accounts of growth in conviction and certainty in faith. I will briefly outline these matters, before considering an alternative way to think of the grammar of propositional belief in Christian faith.

It is important to note that, for Plantinga, ‘belief’ and ‘faith’ are not interchangeable.

31 See Plantinga, Warranted Christian Belief, p.248.
terms. Belief, as noted earlier, is a matter of being induced by the Holy Spirit to believe ‘the main lines of the Christian story’, and this is a cognitive process. According to Plantinga, ‘what one believes are propositions’, and the propositions concerning the central truths of the gospel form the content of faith. Faith itself, however, also requires the regeneration of the will, and the knowledge that the propositional content of faith applies to me. My concern is whether it makes sense to talk about the propositional content of faith, Christian belief, as if the meaning of those propositions could be known independently of the living out of the practices and disciplines of Christian life.

Let me try to explain that more clearly. Christian believers often speak of the growth or the deepening of faith. This growth or deepening is understood to be related, among other things, to practices of prayer, worship, sacramental life and service. It is related to the life of discipleship, obedience and sacrifice. These practices open up the encounter between the believer and God, in which the believer’s life is transformed and caught up more fully into the trinitarian dynamic. According to Plantinga’s model, however, there is no necessary connection between coming to believe in the propositional content of Christian faith and these practices of prayer, sacrament and so on. That means that the process of coming to understand the meaning of the propositional content of faith more richly and fully, the increase or deepening of belief towards knowledge, is understood not in terms of the deepening of encounter and the transformation of life, but in terms of fervour of believing. For St Paul, we know insofar as we allow ourselves to be known, and so knowledge of the truths of faith is itself always deepening. For Plantinga, we know insofar as we hold our beliefs with ‘sufficient firmness’.

To put this another way, in his concern to emphasise what he calls the ‘basicality’ of belief, which arises ‘immediately’ through the combined testimony of Scripture and the Holy Spirit, Plantinga appears to leave no room for our belief itself to deepen or mature.

33 Plantinga, Warranted Christian Belief, p.249.
35 ‘For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end … For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known’. (1 Cor.13. 9-10, 12).
37 Plantinga, Warranted Christian Belief, pp.258-262. The notion of ‘immediately’ here does not refer to a moment of time, but to the absence of any ‘intermediate’ process in the formation of belief such as the process of argument from evidence. My point does not turn on a criticism of the suggestion that belief could arise in an instant, but on the suggestion that belief arises complete and fixed.
He can allow that faith may grow, but with belief it is as if an epistemic light switch goes on, and there is knowledge of the propositions of faith, fixed and complete.

What is further obscured on this account is the relationship between certainty and doubt. Plantinga says:

For the person with faith (at least in the paradigmatic instances), the great things of the gospel seem clearly true, obvious, compelling. She finds herself convinced – just as she does in the case of clear memory beliefs or her belief in elementary truths of arithmetic. 38

And, because of his concern to demonstrate the rationality of belief, Plantinga emphasises strongly that faith is not, epistemologically, a ‘leap in the dark’ and nor is it experienced as such ‘from the inside’. Rather, ‘those who have faith have a source of knowledge that transcends our ordinary perceptual faculties and cognitive processes’. 39

This is, I think, a complex matter. On the one hand, there is a sense in which the person with faith does not doubt. On the other hand, there remains, as Williams puts it, a sense of the ‘intractable strangeness of the ground of belief’, a sense that overwhelms at least me from time to time that the things of the gospel are essentially mysterious, ungraspable, and weird. What bothers me about Plantinga’s account of certainty in faith is that it seems deaf to the strangeness and the mystery of what it purports to believe. If certainty in faith requires unwavering belief in the truth of certain propositions then doubt is the enemy of faith. But if certainty in faith and conviction in belief arises in proportion as one allows one’s life to be transformed by its encounter with the living God, then doubt plays a different role. One can be present to a sense of the utter strangeness and unbelievability of the truths of the gospel, at the very same time as finding that there is no other ground upon which one can imagine orienting one’s life.

Wittgenstein spoke, in these terms, of the certainty needed to believe in the resurrection. This certainty he said, is faith and faith ‘is faith in what is needed by my heart, my soul, not my speculative intelligence’. So, he said:

What combats doubt is, as it were, redemption. Holding fast to this must be holding fast to that belief. So what that means is: first you must be redeemed and hold on to your redemption ... - then you will see that you are holding fast to this belief. So this can come about only if you no longer rest your weight on the earth but suspend yourself from heaven. 40

38 Plantinga, Warranted Christian Belief, p.264.
39 Plantinga, Warranted Christian Belief, p.266.
Plantinga’s difficulty in giving an adequate account of the possibility of growth in conviction and the nature of certainty in faith, is connected, I suggest, to a fundamentally inadequate understanding of the nature of doctrinal truth itself. Plantinga seems to be anxious that accounts of belief in terms of participation in the life of God somehow undermine the robustness of the concept of truth in this domain.\textsuperscript{41} He says:

\begin{quote}
Even if faith is more than cognitive, it is also and at least a cognitive activity. It is a matter of believing (‘knowledge’, Calvin says) something or other. Christians, on this account, don’t merely find their identity in the Christian story, or live in it or out of it; they believe it, take the story to be the sober truth.\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

The problem with this passage is that Plantinga’s persistent italicising begs the question at issue. What does it mean to take the doctrinal statements of faith ‘to be the sober truth’ apart from living out of them? If such beliefs are simply additional mental furniture, then what in reality do they amount to? D.Z. Phillips has argued, I think rightly, that this emphasis on the centrality of belief, understood as a mental event, for defending the possibility of truth in religious thought is philosophically unintelligible.\textsuperscript{43} My concern, here, however is not only that such an account of belief is unintelligible, but that it falsifies our understanding of the nature of the propositional ‘truths’ of the Christian faith.

Plantinga relates to propositional truths of faith as if they are the final word, the final set of facts, about who God is and what God has done for me. Salvation and knowledge of God consists in believing these facts. I have been suggesting, by contrast, that we cannot even understand what such theological talk means, unless we are ourselves already in the process of being transformed by our encounter with God. But what that means is that the propositional ‘truths’ of our faith might better be understood not so much as strange kinds of ‘facts’, but as speech which attempts to express and open up the possibility of the kind of encounter that would authenticate them.\textsuperscript{44} They are the concepts developed under pressure of encounter with God through which we are invited to appropriate, wrestle with and deepen our experience. Historically, this is in fact how the doctrinal statements of Christian belief, the central creedal propositions, came to be made. If that is right, then our dogmatic speech must be judged by whether it leads us into and faithfully reflects that same encounter. And

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{42} Plantinga, \textit{Warranted Christian Belief}, p.247.
\textsuperscript{43} Phillips, \textit{Religion and Friendly Fire}, p.59.
\end{footnotes}
this then suggests that the critical concepts by which the truths of Christian belief are assessed must necessarily make reference to the lives which are lived in response to them.

**The ‘rationality’ of Christian faith**

So far in this paper, I have been criticising aspects of Plantinga’s epistemology of Christian belief. I have said that it relies upon a theologically suspect picture of the Holy Spirit, that it distorts our understanding of the relationship between faith and the life of the believer, and that it leads to an inadequate account of the nature of the propositional statements of belief. Let us grant for the sake of argument that these criticisms are valid. Could it be the case that even if Plantinga’s account of the epistemology of Christian belief is inadequate, his project of demonstrating the rational acceptability of Christian faith is successful?

Remember that Plantinga does not claim to have demonstrated that Christian belief is in fact true, although he himself believes that it is.\(^{45}\) All that he claims to have shown by philosophical argument is that, first, Christian belief has not been demonstrated to be false and that, second, if Christian belief is true then it can also be warranted.\(^{46}\) That is, he claims to have developed a model which demonstrates that Christian belief is vulnerable to no a priori denial of its rationality. The model does that by depicting how true beliefs about God could arise in a ‘basic’ way, from cognitive apparatus (the sensus divinitatis and the internal invitation of the Holy Spirit) functioning properly in an appropriate epistemic environment. He concedes that if Christian belief is in fact false, then his model will fail to give it warrant. On the other hand, as I noted at the outset, he holds that if Christian belief is true then it is very likely warranted by way of the A/C model or something similar.\(^{47}\)

My argument has been, however, that whatever is rationally warranted by Plantinga’s model it is not, as Plantinga hoped, the Christian belief that is ‘common to the great creeds of the main branches of the Christian church, what unites Calvin and Aquinas, Luther and Augustine, Menno Simons and Karl Barth, Mother Teresa and St Maximus the Confessor, Billy Graham and St Gregory Palamas – classical Christian belief, as we might call it’.\(^{48}\)


\(^{46}\) Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp.169-170. By ‘warrant’ he means that which makes the difference between knowledge and ‘mere true belief’. In the context of Christian belief, Plantinga is trying to establish that not only does Christian belief ‘happen’ to be true, but that we can know it to be true, that we are warranted in having that belief.


is instead a ‘picture’ of Christian belief capable of fitting into a pre-existing epistemological framework. This may be why Plantinga’s use of theological language, such as the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, seems to be so jarring. He writes as a philosopher in order to justify the rationality of Christian belief. He uses the Holy Spirit as an explanatory device to solve the philosophical problem of how rational beliefs about God could be formed by the cognitive apparatus of the modern self. But as I tried to show earlier, from a theological perspective, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit points to the undoing of that very picture of the relationship between God and the knowing self. To speak truthfully of the Spirit, I suggested, we somehow need to begin to occupy or to enter the new reality created by it. If that is right, then to attempt to speak of the Holy Spirit as if such talk were just straightforwardly available within a rationalist framework is to exhibit a kind of tone-deafness to the possibilities of the meaningful use of such language.

What then of the apologetic project of defending the intellectual or rational acceptability of Christian belief for educated and intelligent 21st century people? A great deal hangs, at this point, on what is implied by the notion of ‘rational acceptability’. In speaking of his apologetic project, Plantinga expresses the desire to make Christian belief believable by contemporary people. He wants to remove the obstacles to belief that might be consequences of particular pictures of what can count as epistemic responsibility. He has rightly resisted the view that the rationality of a belief depends upon the availability of evidence capable of convincing any rational and objective observer. To think that belief in God is irrational simply because compelling evidence for the hypothesis cannot be produced, is to hold belief in God to a higher standard of proof than belief in other minds, belief in historical fact, and so on. Plantinga has done much to clear away a certain kind of misunderstanding about what kind of evidence or warrant would be required for rational or responsible religious belief.

However, at times it is as though Plantinga thinks that, with the right epistemological account, Christian belief will just slot directly into the existing belief structure and into the lives of intelligent 21st century people. What makes me uneasy about this is that it seems not to recognise that conversion and faith call for a kind of vulnerability, a willingness to tolerate ‘unknowing’, which is not readily embraced by the self-contained rational agents of the intellectual West. I suggested earlier that in his attempt to make Christian belief seem unproblematically ‘rational’, Plantinga is insufficiently attentive to the strangeness and
difficulty of Christian belief. St Paul said that the wisdom of the cross is ‘a stumbling block
to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles’ (1 Cor.1.23). He had no illusions that it would be found
persuasive according to the ‘wisdom of the world’ (1 Cor. 1.20). Rowan Williams too, in
the quote I cited at the beginning, emphasised that ‘the question involved here is not our
interrogation of the data, but its interrogation of us’. This raises a complex issue.

On the one hand, it matters that when we put our faith in or give our trust to
something, we trust worthily. In that sense, the philosophical concern to withhold belief
until adequate reason has been provided is serious and important. On the other hand, there is
a kind of arrogance in the philosophical approach to this question which assumes that
philosophical argument is the appropriate means for assessing whether adequate reason has
been provided. I agree with Plantinga that faith is not an ‘irrational’ enterprise, and that it
can be responsibly believed. In that sense, when Christian belief is embraced it does not
require an embrace of irrationality or the suspension of critical judgement.

I think, however, that the trustworthiness of faith can be known only with our lives,
and not with our cognitive faculties alone. That means that to allow faith to enter our lives
calls for the willingness to be vulnerable to encounter with the living God, and to be
transformed through that encounter by way of the practices of prayer, service and
sacrament. Although Plantinga’s apologetic may clear away certain 21st century obstacles or
a priori objections to belief, it seems to me that it leaves in place and perhaps even
reinforces the deeper resistances of contemporary people to the holy wisdom of
vulnerability and unknowing and darkness. For that reason, I would suggest that the
apologetic project most sorely needed in the 21st century is not that of defending the
intellectual acceptability of Christian belief, but is that of enabling people to take seriously
the wisdom of their hearts.