*Knowledge and Christian Belief*. By Alvin Plantinga. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015. Paperback. 126 p. $16.00.

Much of Alvin Plantinga’s career has focused on the question of whether or not everyday, non-academic Christians can have warranted beliefs about Christianity. His famous series of books on warranted belief include *Warrant: The Current Debate* (1993), summarizing modern views on warranted beliefs in general; *Warrant and Proper Function* (1993), which is Plantinga’s own contribution to the warrant question in general, focusing on the proper functioning and use of mental faculties and the question of warrant; and *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000) standing as the culmination of these studies and their importance for Christian ideas on warrant.

While Plantinga is a philosopher and writes academically, it is readily obvious that who he is writing for, ultimately, is the everyday Christian. While Plantinga writes *to* academic philosophers, he writes in defense of the cognitive elements of Christianity as held by non-academic Christians and for the justification that ordinary Christians find for their beliefs. This purpose is so important for Plantinga that he has made *Warranted Christian Belief* available for free online for the benefit of the Christian Church.

While it had a dramatic impact on philosophy, *Warranted Christian Belief* was too technical a volume for the ordinary Christian to benefit from. In a day when Christians find their beliefs undermined in popular culture, Plantinga decided that it was not enough to have a book by academics for academics, but that instead he needed to write a book that would help ordinary Christians understand that their beliefs are rational. Therefore, *Knowledge and Christian Belief* contains the same basic material as Warranted Christian Belief, reworked for a lay audience.

Plantinga’s system separates out two different types of judgment on belief - whether a belief is *justified* and whether a belief is *warranted*. A justified belief is one in which you are not violating any proper epistemological duty for holding. That is, confronted with confounding evidence, we may have any number of epistemological duties - telling the truth to yourself and others, performing further investigation, consulting with experts, etc. One is justified in their belief if, after performing all epistemological duties, you still hold to the belief. The question with justification is a moral one - whether or not you have performed your moral duty to knowledge in response to your belief and its criticisms.

Warrant is a step further. For a belief to be warranted, the belief must have been formed by a properly functioning cognitive faculty which is properly aimed at generating true beliefs. A madman may be justified in his beliefs, but his beliefs are not warranted because his cognitive faculties are impaired. Someone hoping against all odds that someone may save them may be justified in their belief, but the cognitive faculties generating that hope are not aimed at generating true beliefs, and therefore is not a warranted belief.

Plantinga defends this version of epistemology against others such as classical foundationalism, by pointing out that most of the beliefs that we have are not generated by argument, but in a direct, basic way. Looking outside my window I see a building. I believe that the building is there. That belief is warranted, not because I have formed a foundationalist argument about the building, but rather because that is a basic function of my cognitive apparatus, I have formed this belief in the basic way, the aim of these cognitive faculties are with attaining the truth, and my cognitive faculties are not impaired. Therefore, I have a warranted belief that the building is there.

Plantinga uses this epistemology to set up a foundation for Christian belief. In his argument, he lays out the basics of the reformed and Catholic views (Calvin and Aquinas) of how Christians attain knowledge of God. In short, God has given people an in-built mechanism for perceiving Him - a *sensus divinitatis*. This has been damaged by sin, but, in general, it is an in-built cognitive function whose purpose is producing true beliefs about God. Similarly, for Christians, the Holy Spirit fulfills a similar role for specifically Christian ideas. If theism is true, then, given Plantinga’s definition of a warranted belief, Christian belief is not just justified, it is warranted.

Plantinga uses this to shift the burden of proof. Since, under Christian theism, we have cognitive machinery that produces these beliefs in God, and they are aimed by God at being truth-generating, the beliefs are warranted. In order for someone to show that a Christian’s beliefs are not warranted, they would have to undermine this setup - essentially they would have to prove that God does not exist.

Thus, while secularists in the line of Marx and Freud are dismissive of religion as being either delusional or wish-fulfillment, they have not successfully shown that Christian belief is without warrant. In order to do that, they must show that God does not exist first. Only then would they be able to demonstrate that the inner capacity to form beliefs about God are not truth-aimed.

On the whole, Plantinga’s program succeeds where it aims. Plantinga gives a defense of the rationality of the belief of everyday Christians, placing the ability to have true knowledge in the hands of not just the academics and apologists, but every believer. Likewise, Plantinga is able to show that the opponents of these beliefs have not been able to successfully tear down this epistemology in any meaningful way.

Some critics of Plantinga’s arguments rightly point out that this argument is self-referential. That is, the Christian is relying on the metaphysics of their own worldview to justify their claims. It may be self-referentially *consistent*, but there are a lot of ideas that are logically consistent but wrong, and Plantinga does not give us a lot of reasons to believe in the Christian view, only that if one does, there are not any present defeaters. I used to be more skeptical about self-referential systems which lacked external justification than I am today. As it turns out, creating a system that is self-referentially consistent is not an easy task. One of the main themes of Christian apologetics in the last few decades has been pointing out the self-referential inconsistency of atheism, of which Plantinga himself has been involved, with his book *Where the Conflict Really Lies* (2011). While still far from being a proof of the system, the fact that Plantinga’s epistemology is self-referentially consistent actually lends it a decent amount of credence.

Where Plantinga falls short, in my opinion, is that the epistemology he gives is a first-person epistemology. For any individual, Plantinga shows that the given believer has the full rights to think of himself as having warranted belief. This epistemology is consistent with the way that humans regularly form beliefs about everything else, and the justifications that we use in doing so. What Plantinga does not do is to present a third-person epistemology - one in which a person can say that Christian belief is communally warranted. That is, if I were to suggest that a given public corporation follow a specific set of ethical ideas derived from Christianity, how could that be justified to the board of directors or the shareholders? How can I jump out from the internal system of warrant, under which I am well-defended for my own case, and apply that to the world at large, where the warrant needs to be not just for myself but for others who do not share my internal viewpoint?

For this task, Plantinga gives little help. While Plantinga’s criticisms of classical foundationalism are entirely correct, the advantage of foundationalism was that it essentially provided a methodology for deciding third party truth claims. Because Plantinga’s system is essentially first-person only, it provides little help for deciding on relative merits between differing parties. It is possible that Plantinga could extend his system to do so, but, so far, he has not. In *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, Plantinga shows that there are systems (such as atheistic naturalism) whose self-referential incoherency prevent them from being a contender for public warrant, but this is not the same thing as providing a means of deciding between different systems that are both self-referentially coherent.

Given the amount of public disapprobation of Christian belief in the modern era, *Warranted Christian Belief* provides the intellectual justification for Christians to maintain their belief in a world and academic system hostile to Christian ideas and ideals. However, more work remains to be done to create an epistemology where Christian thought has a merited place not only to the individual in question, but in the community as a whole.

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