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## **Rational Religious Beliefs Without Natural Reason? A Critical Study of Alvin Plantinga Position**

**Racjonalne przekonania religijne  
bez naturalnego rozumu? Krytyczne studium  
stanowiska Alvina Plantingi**

### **Abstract**

According to an intuition highly popular in Western world, beliefs, including religious beliefs, must be supported by sufficient evidence in order to be held in a rational (or justified) way (evidentialism). Plantinga formulates his own view about the rationality of religious beliefs, which he considers as opposite to the traditional view. The central thesis of his position is that religious beliefs are perfectly rational when believed in the basic way, that is without any evidence or argument and even without the use of natural reason at all. According to Plantinga people could have acquired their religious beliefs via extraordinary cognitive faculty, which he calls, after Calvin, *sensus divinitatis*. In this paper I ask a question whether Plantinga successfully rejects traditional intuition about the need of natural reason for religious beliefs. For this purpose, I first refer to Plantinga's understanding of the traditional concept of the rationality of religious beliefs. I then summarize Plantinga's views on the third condition of knowledge and his account of the rationality of religious beliefs.

Next, I turn to the critical part of the article. I point out the inadequacy of Plantinga's position. To do so I first analyze and criticize Plantinga's argument for the view that possessing sufficient evidence for religious beliefs is not an epistemic duty. I argue that Plantinga rejects only one understanding of that requirement and this is not enough to reject the whole idea of evidentialism. Then, I criticize Plantinga's position on the third condition of knowledge, which he calls warrant. To this end I recall Laurence Bonjour's argument against externalism, since my critique of Plantinga's position is analogous to Bonjour's argument. If my critique is successful then it is not that religious belief could be held in rational way without the use of natural reason, because in this case subject would be epistemically irresponsible.

**Keywords:** religious beliefs, evidentialism, Alvin Plantinga, *sensus divinitatis*, warrant, externalism

### Abstrakt

Zgodnie z intuicją, cieszącą się znaczną popularnością w świecie Zachodu, przekonania, w tym przekonania religijne, muszą opierać się na wystarczających świadectwach, aby mogły być żywione w racjonalny (lub uzasadniony) sposób (teza ewidencjalizmu). Plantinga formułuje swoją własną koncepcję racjonalności przekonań religijnych, którą uważa za przeciwną temu tradycyjnemu pogładowi. Zgodnie z centralną tezą jego stanowiska przekonania religijne są w pełni racjonalne, gdy są żywione w sposób bazowy, to znaczy bez odniesienia do jakichkolwiek świadectw, argumentów, a nawet w ogóle bez użycia rozumu naturalnego. Według Plantingi ludzie mogą nabyć przekonania religijne za pomocą nadzwyczajnej władzy poznawczej, którą nazywa za Kalwinem *sensus divinitatis*. W artykule zadaję pytanie, czy Plantindze udało się odrzucić tradycyjną intuicję dotyczącą potrzeby użycia rozumu naturalnego względem przekonań religijnych. W tym celu w pierwszej kolejności odnoszę się do Plantingi rozumienia tradycyjnej koncepcji racjonalności przekonań religijnych. Następnie przytaczam jego stanowisko w sprawie trzeciego warunku wiedzy i jego koncepcję racjonalności przekonań religijnych. W dalszej kolejności przechodzę do krytycznej części artykułu. Wskazuję na nieadekwatność stanowiska Plantingi. W tym celu najpierw analizuję i krytykuję argumentację Plantingi, która wspierać ma tezę, że posiadanie wystarczających świadectw na rzecz przekonań religijnych nie jest obowiązkiem epistemicznym. Argumentuję, że Plantinga odrzuca tylko jedno możliwe rozumienie tego wymogu i nie wystarcza to do odrzucenia całej idei ewidencjalizmu. Następnie krytykuję stanowisko Plantingi na temat trzeciego warunku wiedzy, nazwanego przez niego gwarancją. W tym celu przywołuję argument Laurence'a Bonjour przeciwko eksternalizmowi, ponieważ moja krytyka stanowiska Plantingi jest analogiczna do

argumentacji BonJour. Jeśli mam rację, to przekonania religijne nie mogą być żywione w racjonalny sposób bez użycia rozumu naturalnego, ponieważ w takim przypadku podmiot postąpi w epistemicznie nieodpowiedzialny sposób.

**Słowa kluczowe:** przekonania religijne, ewidencjalizm, Alvin Plantinga, *sensus divinitatis*, gwarancja, eksternalizm

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

According to an intuition highly popular in Western world, beliefs, including religious beliefs, must be supported by sufficient evidence in order to be held in a rational (or justified) way (evidentialism). Alvin Plantinga formulates his own view about the rationality of religious beliefs, which he considers as opposite to the traditional view. The central thesis of his position is that religious beliefs are perfectly rational when believed in the basic way, that is without any arguments or evidence. According to Plantinga religious beliefs in this respect resemble commonsense beliefs like beliefs about past or other minds. Later Plantinga formulates a theory of third condition of knowledge, which strongly supports his claim about basic religious beliefs. If that theory is true, then religious beliefs can be rational without any evidence and even without the use of natural reason at all. By “natural reason” I understand all those cognitive faculties that are commonly thought to give us knowledge of the world, such as perception, introspection, memory, logical intuition. According to Plantinga the use of those cognitive faculties is not necessary for rational believing in God, because people could have acquired their religious beliefs via extraordinary cognitive faculty, which he calls, after Calvin, *sensus divinitatis*.

In this paper I ask a question whether Plantinga successfully rejects traditional intuition about the need of natural reason for religious beliefs. For this purpose, I first refer to Plantinga’s understanding of the traditional concept of the rationality of religious beliefs. I then summarize Plantinga’s views on the third condition of knowledge and his account

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1 This research project was funded by the National Science Centre by decision no. DEC-2012/05/N/HS1/02864. The author obtained funding for the preparation of a doctoral dissertation from National Science Centre as part of the funding of a doctoral scholarship by decision no. DEC-2014/12/T/HS1/00145. The considerations presented in this article are also included in my Polish-language monograph: Ewa Odoj, *Wiara bez świadectw? Wokół Alwina Plantingi krytyki ewidencjalizmu w epistemologii religii* (Lublin: TN KUL, 2020).

of the rationality of religious beliefs. Next, I turn to the critical part of the article. I point out the inadequacy of Plantinga's position. To do so I first analyze and criticize Plantinga's argument for the view that possessing sufficient evidence for religious beliefs is not an epistemic duty. I argue that Plantinga rejects only one understanding of that requirement and this is not enough to reject the whole idea of evidentialism. Then, I criticize Plantinga's position on the third condition of knowledge, which he calls warrant. To this end I recall Laurence BonJour's argument against externalism, since my critique of Plantinga's position is analogous to BonJour's argument. If my critique is successful then it is not that religious belief could be held in rational way without the use of natural reason, because in this case subject would be epistemically irresponsible.

### Traditional view on the rationality of religious beliefs

Plantinga begins his consideration on the rationality of religious beliefs by drawing attention to the position of critics of theism, which he calls evidentialist objectors (such as Antony Flew, Michael Scriven, Bertrand Russel, John L. Mackie):

Evidentialist objectors to theistic belief argue that there is insufficient evidence for theistic belief, and to believe something for which you have insufficient evidence is to go contrary to your epistemic duties. This view that there is a duty not to believe in God without propositional evidence has a long and distinguished history, going back at least to Locke and possibly to Descartes [...].<sup>2</sup>

Plantinga claims that the central assumption of evidentialist objectors is the requirement of the possession of sufficient evidence for religious beliefs. Let me call this requirement EV-REL thesis:

EV-REL [...] there is a sort of intellectual duty or obligation not to believe in God without having evidence, or sufficient evidence.<sup>3</sup>

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2 Alvin Plantinga, "The Prospects for Natural Theology", *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 291. See also highly influential, first article in which Plantinga presents his position on the rationality of religious beliefs: "Reason and Belief in God", in: *Faith and Rationality. Reason and Belief in God*, eds. Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1983), 20–29.

3 Plantinga, "The Prospects for Natural Theology", 290. Other wording: *It is irrational or unreasonable to accept theistic belief in the absence of sufficient evidence* (Plantinga,

Plantinga realized that the same assumption is held by many of those who defend the rationality of religious beliefs, like natural theologians.<sup>4</sup> According to Plantinga this assumption constitutes a reason why natural theologians look for the proves or arguments for theism. The only difference is that the defenders of religious beliefs think that there is sufficient evidence for those beliefs, whereas objectors think that there is not. Let me call the view on the rationality of religious beliefs, which assumes the EV-REL thesis, traditional view on the rationality of religious beliefs.

Plantinga claims that EV-REL is an application of more general thesis – which he called evidentialism – to religious beliefs. Famous formulation of evidentialism comes from William K. Clifford:

EVWC It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.<sup>5</sup>

But we can make use of the above wording of EV-REL to formulate general EV thesis:

EV There is a sort of intellectual duty not to believe a proposition without *having* sufficient evidence.<sup>6</sup>

According to Plantinga EV thesis (and also EV-REL thesis) is strictly associated with the deontological concept of epistemic justification. This is a view that epistemic justification consists of fulfilling epistemic duties and EV thesis is one of the possible (and most widely accepted) formulations of this duty. So according to Plantinga traditional concept of the rationality of religious belief is the view that if one believes in God without having sufficient evidence, then one is flouting his epistemic duties, which means that one is unjustified or irrational.

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“Reason and Belief in God”, 27 and 29).

- 4 It is worth noting that Plantinga considers Richard Swinburne, among others, as a contemporary defender of theism, who represents an evidentialist approach. In his main work on the rationality of religious beliefs, *Warranted Christian Beliefs*, Plantinga devotes relatively considerable attention to criticizing this author’s views.
- 5 William K. Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief”, in: *Lectures and Essays*, eds. Leslie Stephen and Frederick Pollock (London: Macmillan and Co., 1879).
- 6 Other wording used by Plantinga: *Many philosophers have endorsed the idea that the strength of one’s belief ought always to be proportional to the strength of the evidence for that belief.* (Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God”, 24).

## Plantinga's concept of warrant and rationality of religious beliefs

Plantinga rejects the traditional view on the rationality of religious beliefs:

So this function of justifying believers in God, putting them in the right, putting them within their epistemic rights, bringing it about that they are or can be in conformance with their epistemic duties in believing in God – this function, I think, does not need to be performed. Those who believe in God without propositional evidence aren't necessarily falling into epistemic transgression.<sup>7</sup>

From the 1980s onwards, he has defended the view that religious beliefs can be held rationally as basic beliefs, i.e. without basing them on any evidence. In later years, he has provided this claim with very strong support in the form of a general-epistemic theory of the third condition of knowledge (warrant). According to Plantinga, the basic factor on which the warrant of a belief depends is that the belief arises as a result of the proper functioning of the subject's cognitive faculties. Plantinga has developed this idea into an elaborate epistemological concept in which he gives the following conditions that must be met for a true belief to have warrant, and consequently to be considered an instance of knowledge:

1. the emergence of a given belief as a result of the proper function of the cognitive faculties, i.e., in accordance with their design plan;
2. the formation of a belief in an environment appropriate for it, i.e., provided by the design plan of a given cognitive faculty;
3. the formation of true beliefs being a function (goal) of the design plan of a given cognitive faculty;
4. the reliability of the design plan;
5. sufficiently high inclinations of the subject to hold a given belief.<sup>8</sup>

Significantly, Plantinga's position represents externalism in epistemology i.e., a view according to which the third condition of knowledge depends on factors inaccessible to the subject in an introspective way.

Plantinga formulates a view on the rationality of religious belief which fits perfectly with his concept of warrant. He presents a possible model of

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7 Plantinga, "The Prospects for Natural Theology", 294.

8 See e.g. Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 19, 46–47.

the acquisition of religious beliefs, which he called A/C Model.<sup>9</sup> According to the model humans have been endowed by God with a sense called *sensus divinitatis*. This sense works in a way analogous to our other senses – it is the mechanism by which, under certain circumstances (such as reading the Bible), religious beliefs are formed in us. Through the work of this extraordinary cognitive process people formulate religious beliefs that are part of Christian doctrine. Beliefs acquired according to the model satisfy the warrant conditions given by Plantinga, and therefore, in line with his view, they are rationally held and deserve the name of knowledge (if they are true). According to Plantinga's position religious beliefs can be produced exclusively by *sensus divinitatis* and the use of any other cognitive faculty is not required for rationality or warrant. He stresses that in this respect they are similar to such common-sense beliefs such as beliefs from memory or perception. What is more, he claims that religious beliefs originate in such a way are properly basic, that is rationally held without basing them on another beliefs. We can express this claim in the following way:

PB-REL Religious beliefs can be rationally held as properly basic beliefs, that is without *basing* them on other beliefs.

Plantinga acknowledges that PB-REL is most important part of his concept of the rationality of religious beliefs and he regards that claim as opposite to traditional view expressed in EV-REL thesis.<sup>10</sup>

Plantinga argues that the models he presents for the acquisition of religious beliefs are possible, and thus it is possible that religious people

9 In *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga also presents a second model (Extended A/C Model, as he calls it) to illustrate how the basic religious beliefs of Christians are possible. According to this model original sin disrupted the work of *sensus divinitatis*, so that God created a “three-tiered cognitive process” which consists of three components: Bible, Holy Spirit, and faith. The Extended Model, however, changes nothing in the substance of Plantinga's position on the rationality of religious belief, hence I will not focus on it in this article.

10 It should be added that Plantinga is at the same time one of the most prominent contemporary proponents of arguments for theism (one should mention his Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism – see e.g. Alvin Plantinga *Naturalism Defeated? Essays on Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism*, ed. James K. Beilby, (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 1–12) and defenders of the rationality of religious beliefs in the face of philosophical arguments for atheism, for instance in his free will defense (see e.g. Alvin Plantinga, “The Free Will Defense”, in: *Philosophy in America*, ed. Max Black, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1965), 204–220). Plantinga thus recognizes a certain important role of rational reflection on religious beliefs, but in the approach referred to here he defends the thesis that such reflection is not a necessary condition for the rationality of such beliefs.

act in accordance with their design plan when they form religious beliefs (and that non-religious people show dysfunction in their cognitive faculties). Plantinga does not argue that the cognitive processes he describes actually exist – he believes that this issue is beyond the scope of philosophical reflection – but for his purpose it is enough to argue that the model is possible. He claims that nobody is able to demonstrate that the model is false and consequently nobody is able to demonstrate that religious beliefs cannot be rationally believed as a basic belief. Hence, evidentialists objectors are wrong when they claim that religious beliefs are necessarily irrational, because there is no sufficient evidence for that beliefs. It is worth emphasizing here, as it will be relevant from the point of view of further considerations, that Plantinga clearly states that the subject does not have to be conscious of possessing the cognitive faculty of *sensus divinitatis*:

It is not the case, of course, that a person who acquires belief by way of the *sensus divinitatis* need have any well-formed ideas about the source or origin of the belief, or any idea that there is such a faculty as the *sensus divinitatis*. (Just as most of us don't have well-developed ideas as to the source and origin of our a priori beliefs.)<sup>11</sup>

Plantinga defends his position in several ways that are mutually supportive. These include:

1. Criticism of classical foundationalism which is according to Plantinga presupposed by traditional view.
2. Criticism of the assumption that EV-REL is an epistemic duty.
3. Criticism of the deontological concept of epistemic justification.
4. His original concept of warrant.

The first topic has been thoroughly discussed in the literature.<sup>12</sup> In another article I present an extended argumentation for the thesis that Plantinga does not succeed in arguing against the deontological concept

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11 Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 179.

12 Particularly noteworthy is the criticism of Plantinga's position formulated by Philip L. Quinn and Plantinga's response to it. See: Philip L. Quinn, "In Search of the Foundations of Theism", *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (4) (1985): 470–476; Alvin Plantinga, "The Foundations of Theism: A Reply", *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (3) (1986): 302–303; Philip L. Quinn, "The Foundations of Theism Again: A Rejoinder to Plantinga", in: Linda Zagzebski (ed.), *Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 15–21.



of epistemic justification.<sup>13</sup> In the present paper I intend to question Plantinga's criticism of the assumption that EV-REL is an epistemic duty. Furthermore, I also seek to present one objection to Plantinga's concept of warrant, which at the same time is an objection to his concept of basic religious beliefs.

### Plantinga's argument against EV-REL as an epistemic duty

In his most important work on the epistemology of religious beliefs, *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga gives examples of people who, in his view, do not meet the EV-REL requirement and yet in doing so do not act against their epistemic duty (they do not act epistemically reprehensibly). In this way, he argues in favor of the thesis that holding religious beliefs in basic way does not contradict epistemic obligation. Plantinga emphasizes that this also applies to contemporary, well-educated people who are aware of cultural diversity and the objections raised against religious beliefs.<sup>14</sup> It is worth taking a closer look at the examples of theists given by Plantinga, which is why I will quote them in their entirety despite their length:

#### Theist 1

Consider such a believer: as far as we can see, her cognitive faculties are functioning properly; she displays no noticeable dysfunction. She is aware of the objections people have made to Christian belief; she has read and reflected on Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche (not to mention Flew, Mackie, and Nielsen) and the other critics of Christian or theistic belief; she knows that the world contains many who do not believe as she does. *She doesn't believe on the basis of propositional evidence; she therefore believes in the basic way.*<sup>15</sup> Can she be justified (in this broadly deontological sense) in believing in God in this way?

The answer seems to be pretty easy. She reads Nietzsche, but remains unmoved by his complaint that Christianity fosters a weak, whining,

13 Ewa Odoj, "Plantinga's Interpretation of Epistemological Deontology", *Roczniki Filozoficzne* 70 (4) (2022): 437–453.

14 Plantinga highlights this issue because of the discussion he had with Philip Quinn. See: Quinn, "In Search of the Foundations of Theism", 476–485; Plantinga, "The Foundations of Theism: A Reply", 303–312; Quinn, "The Foundations of Theism Again: A Rejoinder to Plantinga", 28–45.

15 The emphasis comes from me.

whimpering, and generally disgusting kind of person: most of the Christians she knows or knows of—Mother Teresa, for instance—don't fit that mold. She finds Freud's contemptuous attitude toward Christianity and theistic belief backed by little more than implausible fantasies about the origin of belief in God (patricide in the primal horde? Can he be serious?); and she finds little more of substance in Marx. She thinks as carefully as she can about these objections and others, but finds them wholly unconvincing.

On the other side, although she is aware of theistic arguments and thinks some of them not without value, she doesn't believe on the basis of them. Rather, she has a rich inner spiritual life, the sort described in the early pages of Jonathan Edwards's *Religious Affections*; it seems to her that she is sometimes made aware, catches a glimpse, of something of the overwhelming beauty and loveliness of the Lord; she is often aware, as it strongly seems to her, of the work of the Holy Spirit in her heart, comforting, encouraging, teaching, leading her to accept the "great things of the gospel" (as Edwards calls them), helping her see that the magnificent scheme of salvation devised by the Lord himself is not only for others but for her as well. After long, hard, conscientious reflection, this all seems to her enormously more convincing than the complaints of the critics. Is she then going contrary to duty in believing as she does? Is she being irresponsible? Clearly not.<sup>16</sup>

It should be clearly emphasized that, according to Plantinga, the Theist 1 described: 1) do not hold their religious beliefs in accordance with the EV-REL thesis, 2) hold their religious beliefs in a basic way. According to him, the second point follows from the first point, in line with his understanding of the basicity of belief. A foreshadowing of this line of argumentation appears in *Reason and Belief in God*, where Plantinga gives the following examples of theists:

#### Theist 2

What about the 14-year-old theist brought up to believe in God in a community where everyone believes? This 14-year-old theist, we may suppose, does not believe in God on the basis of evidence. He has never heard of the cosmological, teleological, or ontological arguments; in fact no one has ever presented him with any evidence at all. And although he has often been told about God, he does not take that testimony as evidence; he does not reason thus: everyone around here says God loves us and cares for us; most of what everyone around here says is true; so probably that is true.

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16 Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 100–101.

Instead, he simply believes what he is taught. Is he violating an all-things-considered intellectual duty? Surely not.<sup>17</sup>

Theist 3

And what about the mature theist – Thomas Aquinas, let us say – who thinks he does have adequate evidence? Let us suppose he is wrong; let us suppose all of his arguments are failures. Nevertheless he has reflected long, hard, and conscientiously on the matter and thinks he does have adequate evidence. Shall we suppose he is violating an all-things-considered intellectual duty here? I should think not.<sup>18</sup>

In *Reason and Belief in God* Plantinga claims only that these theists do not hold their beliefs in accordance with the EW-REL thesis, and he does not think that they would violate their epistemic duty.

To sum up, we can reconstruct Plantinga's argument in the following way:

1. Theists 1, 2 and 3 do not satisfy the EV-REL requirement.
2. People described in the examples do not violate any of their epistemic duties.
3. So, EV-REL requirement is not an epistemic duty.

### Plantinga's interpretation of the evidentialism requirement

It is especially important to ask the question what exactly Plantinga understands by EV-REL thesis. He starts his analysis of the traditional view on the rationality of religious beliefs by referring to philosophical critics of theism (like Mackie, Flew etc.). As an effect of that analysis, he comes to the conclusion that according to that critics religious beliefs should be *based* on evidence. Moreover, evidence should have the form of reasoning, which:

1. Has the form of deductive, inductive or abductive argument.
2. Premises are other justified beliefs of the subject.
3. Premises and the correctness of inference should be intersubjectively accessible and verifiable.
4. Should be wholly consciously formulated by the subject and conclusion should be accepted in effect of conducting that argument.

<sup>17</sup> Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God", 33.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, 33–34.

It is easy to see that these conditions resemble the standards of scientific knowledge. Plantinga's understanding of the basicity of belief is similarly reconstructed by Quinn: "For any person *S* and distinct propositions *p* and *q*, *S* believes *q* on the basis of *p* only if *S* entertains *p*, *S* accepts *p*, *S* infers *q* from *p*, and *S* accepts *q*".<sup>19</sup> Plantinga presupposes such an understanding of the EV and EV-REL thesis in developing his own concept of the rationality of religious beliefs (which he contrasts with EV-REL thesis). Note that the mentioned in paragraph 1 EV thesis is very general. It states only that subject should *have* sufficient evidence for his or her beliefs. Let me call the EV thesis interpreted with conditions pointed by Plantinga strong EV (sEV) and accordingly strong EV-REL (sEV-REL). The most important aspect of that interpretation is the assumption that there should be a basis relation between evidence and belief:

sEV        There is a sort of intellectual duty not to believe a proposition without *basing* it on sufficient evidence

Why should one accept – as Plantinga does – that EV and EV-REL requirement implies a basis relation? We can think of another noetic structure with different relation between belief and evidence. For example, evidence may be a support for a belief, even for a basic one. Such evidence is not a basis for a belief but serves as confirmation for the truth of that belief. In his interesting discussion with Philip L. Quinn Plantinga argues – I think successfully – that even if somebody has a defeater for his basic belief but manages to defeat that defeater, he still holds his belief as basic. In other words, argumentation against a potential defeater is not a basis for belief in question.<sup>20</sup> In a sense he is right, but that does not mean that in some conditions basic beliefs – even basic perceptual beliefs – might require support from other beliefs to be justified (for example in the situation of bad lighting conditions). It is possible to understand EV requirement in such a way, that it is satisfied in the case of having only supportive evidence for the belief. This would be a form of weaker interpretation of EV-REL requirement, than the one presupposed by Plantinga. Nowadays evidentialism is discussed in general epistemology (for example defended by Richard Feldman and Earl Conee, analyzed in the context of the ethics of belief by others). In these discussions it is easy to see that Plantinga's interpretation is not so popular. For example, Feldman defines Cliffordian EV thesis by use of the

19 Quinn, "In Search of the Foundations of Theism", 482.

20 Plantinga, "The Foundations of Theism: A Reply", 307–312.

term „support”: “It is epistemically wrong to believe a proposition when one’s evidence fails to support that proposition”.<sup>21</sup> Quinn takes a similar view: in his opinion, Plantinga adopts a very narrow understanding of the relationship between belief and evidence (basing relation), whereas for the problem of the rationality of religious belief a broader understanding is more important.<sup>22</sup>

Referring back to Plantinga’s reasoning mentioned in the previous paragraph, in premise (1) Plantinga understands strong EV-REL. I am ready to agree that those theists do not satisfy sEV-REL and at the same time do not violate any of their epistemic duties (premise 2). So, I can admit that Plantinga is right that satisfaction of sEV-REL is not an epistemic duty (as stated in conclusion). In other words, I can agree that in his argument Plantinga shows that religious beliefs do not have to meet the standards of scientific knowledge (although, let me add honestly, at least some opponents of theism would not agree). But does Plantinga succeed in showing that EV-REL does not embody epistemic duty? I think he does not. We can easily indicate some kinds of evidence that the mentioned by Plantinga theists possess. Theist 3 (Thomas Aquinas) is subjectively confident that he is in possession of sound arguments for theism. Theist 2 (14-year-old theist) has evidence in the form of testimony of members of his community. Theist 1 is in possession of various forms of evidence: (1) she has evidence which defeat objections to Christian and theistic beliefs (an example of Mother Theresa for instance), (2) she knows that there are arguments in favor of theism which he accepts as sound, at least to some extent, (3) she has an experience that can be described as an experience of God, (4) she sees signs of a supernatural force at work in her life, which she identifies with the Holy Spirit, (5) she finds confirmation of the plausibility of her experiences in texts by, for example, Edwards. Moreover, Plantinga strongly emphasizes that the believers have that supportive evidence. I think that the problem with properly evaluating Plantinga’s account comes from the fact that although he openly rejects the requirement of having sufficient evidence in favor of religious belief, he does include many elements of this nature in the examples of theists that he himself provides.

So, it seems that in rejecting EV-REL requirement Plantinga uses examples in which various forms of evidence are present, although that evidence does not meet the standards of strong interpretation that he

21 Richard Feldman, “Clifford’s Principle and James’s Option”, *Social Epistemology* 20 (2006): 20.

22 Quinn, “In Search of the Foundations of Theism”, 482–484.

presupposes. Thus, Plantinga does not show that the idea expressed by EV-REL thesis is not an epistemic duty. At most, he shows only that sEV-REL is not an epistemic duty. However, this is not enough to reject the intuition rooted in our philosophical tradition that stands behind the general EV and the EV-REL requirements. We can construct such an understanding of the general wording of EV-REL that is satisfied by above theists. For example, we can weaken the condition of intersubjective agreement on the argument and allow testimony to serve as evidence. We can also weaken the condition of fully conscious inference because in everyday life we really rarely make a fully conscious inference when coming to conclusion. Let me call this possible interpretation of EV-REL requirement – which might be satisfied by the above theists – a weak EV-REL requirement. It is worth noting at this point that any worldview beliefs do not meet the requirements of sEV, including those ones held by opponents of theism. Nevertheless, worldview beliefs can be supported by weakly understood evidence and thus meet the requirements of the weak EV principle.

At least with respect to Theist 1 (the example included in *Warranted and Christian Belief*) we can express Plantinga's reasoning in a more elaborated version:

1. Theist 1 does not satisfy the EV-REL requirement.
2. Thus, Theist 1 holds her religious belief as a basic belief.
3. The Theist 1 does not violate any of her epistemic duties and in that deontological sense she is justified.
4. Thus, religious beliefs can be deontologically justified when held in the basic way.

For Plantinga premise (2) follows from (1) because, first, he assumes that belief is either basic or non-basic (as he accepts foundationalism), and second, he understands basic beliefs as follows: "This belief will ordinarily be basic, in the sense that it is not accepted on the evidential basis of other propositions".<sup>23</sup> It is easy to see that Plantinga understands the basicity of beliefs by contrast with the sEV thesis. If I am right then from the fact that Theist's 1 religious belief is basic in Plantinga's sense does not follow that it is not believed in accordance with EV-REL.

Jeremy Randel Koons points out that Plantinga operates with two understandings of basicity: psychological and epistemic. The aforementioned understanding of basicity (by contrast with the EV thesis) is a psychological understanding, as it makes the basicity crucially

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23 Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 175.

dependent on the inference consciously carried out by the subject.<sup>24</sup> The second understanding assumed by Plantinga is an epistemic interpretation of basicity as being generated by reliable cognitive faculty. In the case of basic religious beliefs, this may be, according to Plantinga, the faculty of *sensus divinitatis*, by virtue of which the subject holds rational religious beliefs despite not having any evidence for them.<sup>25</sup> In the next section of this article, I will try to answer the question of whether Plantinga is correct in claiming that religious beliefs can be basic in the latter sense. My criticism of this position of Plantinga's will be directed primarily towards his concept of warrant. I will begin this part of the article by recalling BonJour's argument against externalism in epistemology.

### BonJour's criticism of externalism

Now, I would like to recall BonJour argumentation against externalism, which is regarded as one of the most important objections to this position. I think it perfectly fits Plantinga's concept of warrant and especially theory of the rationality of religious beliefs. BonJour points out that representatives of externalism (such as David M. Armstrong) focus on typical instances of non-inferential knowledge (such as perception, memory) and on these cases demonstrate the validity of their theories. BonJour proposes to examine the correctness of the conditions given by the externalists by applying them to the example of a cognitive faculty that is not universally accepted, but is only possible. This allows us, he believes, to see the weaknesses of externalism. He proposes a following counterexample to externalism:

Norman – a reliable clairvoyant

Norman, under certain conditions that usually obtain, is a completely reliable clairvoyant with respect to certain kinds of subject matter. He possesses no evidence or reasons of any kind for or against the general possibility of such a cognitive power, or for or against the thesis that he possesses

24 A separate question is whether such an understanding of the notion of basic beliefs is useful in epistemology. However, this issue is beyond the scope of the article. In my monograph on Plantinga's epistemology of religion, I point out the weakness of the notion constructed in this way (Odoj, *Wiara bez świadectw?*, 177–184).

25 Koons criticizes Plantinga's position emphasizing the dependence of all basic beliefs, to which Plantinga refers, on the subject's assumptions about the world (such as the forces present in nature, cognitive equipment of human beings etc.). Jeremy Koons, "Plantinga on Properly Basic Belief in God: Lessons from the Epistemology of Perception", *The Philosophical Quarterly* 61 (245) (2011): 839–850.

it. One day Norman comes to believe that the President is in New York City, though he has no evidence either for or against this belief. In fact the belief is true and results from his clairvoyant power, under circumstances in which it is completely reliable.<sup>26</sup>

BonJour argues that in the above example conditions of knowledge and justification suggested by externalists are met. The power of clairvoyance operates with absolute reliability, as it is often referred to in reference to Alvin Goldman's externalist view, called reliabilism. Nevertheless, intuitively the belief is not an instance of knowledge, because we have the intuition that Norman is acting irrationally. Thus, the conditions given by the externalists appear to be insufficient. BonJour points out that it is the outside observer, who knows of Norman's possession of reliable clairvoyant faculty and reasonably and responsibly holds belief about the President's whereabouts, but not Norman. BonJour emphasizes the condition of epistemic responsibility of the subject, which is not met by Norman. Moreover, epistemic rationality and responsibility requires, according to BonJour, that the subject is aware of the reliability of the source of a particular belief:

Part's of one's epistemic duty is to reflect critically upon one's beliefs, and such critical reflection precludes believing things to which one has, to one's knowledge, no reliable means of epistemic access.<sup>27</sup>

Presumably, internalists formulate the condition relating to the self-consciousness of the subject in a too demanding manner. Their position therefore faces a strong criticism from externalists, according to which the conditions internalists give are not necessary because everyday beliefs, e.g. perceptual, are not accompanied by any kind of self-reflection by the subject. The example of BonJour seems to undermine this externalist argument, as it shows that beliefs formed through a cognitive faculty of which the subject has absolutely no awareness do not constitute instances of knowledge. BonJour points out that we hold very strong, unarticulated beliefs about our normal cognitive faculties. As can be seen from the example he presents, they turn out to play a crucial role in the proper formation of beliefs.

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26 Laurence BonJour, "Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5 (1980): 62.

27 *Ibidem*, 63.



## The insufficiency of Plantinga's position

I think that Plantinga's position on warrant and rationality of religious beliefs perfectly represents the problem of externalism pointed out by BonJour. We can mimic BonJour counterexample in such a way:

Alvin – the Reliable Theist

Alvin lives in a future society that has successfully realized the dream of complete secularization of the public sphere. He has never encountered adherents of any religions. Not only he is unfamiliar with Christian doctrine – such as the doctrine of Scripture as the Word of God – but he has no concept of a monotheistic God at all. Alvin, however, possesses a reliable faculty to recognize the existence of God, the *sensus divinitatis*, with which he has been endowed by his Creator. He knows nothing about it – he has no evidence for or against the possibility of the existence of such a cognitive faculty (both a faculty in general and specifically in his case). One day, which he spent in the library, during an accidental encounter with the Bible, thanks to the *sensus divinitatis* he comes to the true belief “God is speaking to me”. This belief imposed on Alvin with tremendous force; he suddenly felt certain that this was the case. Alvin, however, has no evidence either for or against his new belief.

In the case of Alvin all conditions of warrant are satisfied so if Plantinga's theory is true, the belief should be an instance of knowledge. Unfortunately, that is not so – we intuitively do not evaluate Alvin's belief as an instance of warranted belief or knowledge (if the belief is true). That means that the conditions proposed by Plantinga are insufficient. Alvin is epistemically irrational, in some way epistemically irresponsible, because from his perspective there is no reason, even the smallest, for believing in the truth of the belief in question. According to BonJour, the example of Norman shows that even the most reliable operation of cognitive faculties cannot compensate for the radical irresponsibility of the subject as assessed from his/her internal perspective. Part of this responsibility is awareness of the source of a belief and evaluation of its reliability. A similar conclusion applies to the example of Alvin. He acts radically irresponsibly by accepting a belief that has just occurred to him, even though he feels strong confidence in it, because from his perspective there is not the slightest reason to believe that the belief is true.<sup>28</sup>

28 A similar assessment of Plantinga's position was given by John Greco. He, similarly, argues that the conditions of warrant given by Plantinga are insufficient due to the absence of a requirement of epistemic responsibility (John Greco, “Is Natural Theology Necessary for Theistic Knowledge?”, in: Linda Zagzebski (ed.), *Rational Faith: Catholic*

If Alvin knew that he possesses the cognitive faculty *sensus divinitatis*, our intuitive assessment of his belief would to some extent change.<sup>29</sup>

Note how our evaluation of Alvin's belief would change when he saw some reason in favor of his religious belief:

#### Alvin and the Missionary

Alvin, mentioned in the previous example, shortly after encountering the Scriptures in the library, met a man – a secret missionary – who told him about the most important dogmas of Christianity, his personal experience of God, and the multitudes of followers of Christ. The missionary's story was very compelling, and the man built up great confidence in Alvin. What he said seemed to Alvin to fit perfectly with a thought that had arisen in him recently while he was in the library. Alvin enthusiastically stated, "God spoke to me!"

In the second example, the belief in question seems to have at least some degree of rationality. Of course, we can argue about whether it deserves to be called knowledge. But a comparison of the two examples above makes it clear that the proper function of extraordinary cognitive faculty alone, which is *sensus divinitatis* postulated by Plantinga, is not sufficient for a belief to be an instance of knowledge (if true). Knowledge requires that the subject from an internal perspective have reason to believe that his belief is true. In other words, knowledge requires that the subject has some evidence for the belief. This boils down to the subject's use of natural cognitive capacities – natural reason as philosophers say – for example perception (or broadly speaking experience of a certain kind), logical intuition or testimony.

One of Plantinga's important lines of reasoning in support of his position on the rationality of religious beliefs is to compare them to common-sense beliefs, such as those derived from perception or memory. Plantinga, along with other externalists, emphasizes that common-sense

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*Responses to Reformed Epistemology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 168–198).

29 So it turns out that the insufficiency of Plantinga's position – on general epistemology as well as on the epistemology of religion – is related to his rejection of a deontological condition. In my analysis of his position I try to show that he presupposes a different understanding of the condition of epistemic responsibility than the one which has been present in the history of philosophy since modern times. Perhaps the most important difference concerns the problem of doxastic voluntarism. Plantinga emphasizes very emphatically that we have no influence over our beliefs, including religious beliefs. I argue that the epistemological tradition, which Plantinga rejects, includes the assumption that to some important extent we have influence over what beliefs we hold (Odoj, *Plantinga's Interpretation of Epistemological*).

beliefs are not accompanied by any reflection on the reliability of their source (we refer to these beliefs as knowledge even in relation to young children who lack the necessary competence for such reflection). Plantinga points to the common features of both kinds of beliefs – religious and common-sense – and on this basis he argues that since in the case of perceptual beliefs awareness of the reliability of the faculty thanks to which they arose is not required, it is also not necessary in the case of religious beliefs.<sup>30</sup> BonJour's argument shows that this issue is much more complicated and the conclusion drawn by Plantinga is too hasty.

## Conclusion

In the first part of my critique of Plantinga's position, I argued that he did not make a good case for the fact that the requirement for evidence in favor of religious beliefs is not an epistemic duty. I pointed out that Plantinga's argumentation remains effective only in relation to the strongly interpreted EV-REL principle, which understands this thesis along the lines of the requirements for scientific knowledge. The most important weakness of Plantinga's argument is that in the examples he describes, he presents people with evidence in favor of religious beliefs, but understood in a weaker way, that is, as we might say, subjectively (i.e. from their own point of view). This means that it is possible to formulate the EV-REL thesis in such a way that these people satisfy it, despite the fact that Plantinga openly rejects the validity of EV-REL.

Plantinga argues that religious beliefs can be rationally held as basic beliefs i.e., beliefs formed through reliably operating extraordinary cognitive faculty. Referring to BonJour's argument against externalism, I formulated an example of Alvin that allows a better assessment of Plantinga's position than the examples he himself gave. In my example, the described subject has a basic religious belief in the sense Plantinga speaks of, but is deprived of all kinds of evidence in favor of this belief from the subject's natural cognitive faculties. In other words, his or her belief is in no way supported by natural cognitive faculties. It turns out that a subject who meets only the requirements indicated by Plantinga intuitively acts epistemically irresponsibly, and therefore his belief does

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30 Plantinga emphasizes above all the fact that both common-sense and religious beliefs are (in typical cases) adopted spontaneously, without analyzing the evidence for and against, accompanied by a strong inclination of the subject to a given belief and deprived of voluntary control. See e.g. Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God", 49; Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 175–176, 262.

not deserve to be called knowledge, even if it happens to be true. The lack of epistemic responsibility of the subject described refers primarily to the fact that the subject does not have any awareness of his possession of reliable cognitive power due to which religious beliefs were formed in him. From his perspective, there is not the slightest reason to believe that this religious belief is true, and not, for example, just a trick of his imagination or desires. This means that conditions for the rationality of religious beliefs stated by Plantinga are insufficient, since they omit the requirement of epistemic responsibility of the subject.

A comparison of my first and second example suggests that the rationality of religious beliefs requires the subject to have some kinds of evidence in favor of those beliefs, even if the believer has extraordinary cognitive faculty, as postulated by Plantinga. The Theists 1, 2 and 3 described by Plantinga do not appear to act epistemically irresponsibly because they have the support of natural reason (especially Theist 3) i.e., from their normal cognitive faculties. Their epistemic situation is similar to that of Alvin in the second example. Even if the religious beliefs of Alvin from my second example and of Theists 1, 2 and 3 arose through a reliable extraordinary cognitive power, such as *sensus divinitatis*, they seem epistemically more proper than the religious belief of Alvin from my first example, precisely due to the fact that these subjects have other supporting evidence for their religious beliefs derived from his or her natural reason.

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