

Debating Christian Religious Epistemology: An Introduction to Five Views on Religious

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Debating Christian Religious Epistemology contains chapter length expositions from proponents of five different views of religious epistemology, which is the study of whether and how subjects' religious beliefs can have a positive epistemic status (such as knowledge, justification, warrant, or rationality). Each of the five views is about Christian religious beliefs in particular. Some authors provide a general epistemological view and apply it to Christianity, and some assume the truth of Christianity. Each contributor was asked specifically to give an argument for their view and to state how their view relates to natural theology (how one might come to know about God apart from divine testimony), divine hiddenness (whether people can, through no fault of their own, lack belief in God), and peer disagreement (whether one should alter their epistemic position when someone else, just as epistemically capable and with all the relevant evidence, disagrees). After each contributor argues for his view, each of the other contributors replies, then the original author gives a final response.

One of the omissions of the book is that there is no explanation as to why one would even have a debate about religious epistemology; the introduction instead describes different epistemic concepts (e.g., justification, evidence, defeaters) and briefly describes what natural theology, divine hiddenness, and peer disagreement are. Although that descriptive introduction will be helpful for audiences unfamiliar with epistemological jargon (e.g., undergraduates), an explanation as to why the topic is important would also be helpful. To that end, I will briefly

explain why it is important to have a discussion about religious epistemology, then I will give a summary and evaluation of the book.

Why even discuss religious epistemology?

Religious beliefs are not empirically verifiable; they instead often involve some sort of reference to an immaterial or transcendent God. For example, the content of religious beliefs could be about whether there is a God, what God is like, whether we need for help from God, what God's attitude toward the world is, whether Jesus had a divine nature, and so on. One might think that these beliefs cannot have a positive epistemic status if we simply rely on mundane ways of learning: our senses to empirically discover what is present, our memory to remember what happened in the past, or the testimony of others to learn about what we have not accessed ourselves. (Although Christian Scriptures provide testimony to religious beliefs, often the testimony can be interpreted in many ways, and we need a way of adjudicating between competing interpretations.) How, then, can our religious beliefs attain a positive epistemic status? Religious epistemology is the discipline that consists in arguing for various answers to that question.

One strategy toward answering religious epistemology's main question is to show that religious beliefs can have a positive epistemic status in much the same way as can scientific, mathematical, or everyday beliefs. Perhaps we should, for example, simply hold religious beliefs on the basis of our evidence. According to that strategy, there is no need to develop or revise our epistemic theories to accommodate religious belief in particular; instead, we just generalize our everyday epistemology in a way that allows religious beliefs to achieve a positive epistemic status. This is the strategy adopted by the first two views. Another strategy is to provide answers

from within a particular tradition such as Christianity to answer how one's religious beliefs can have a positive epistemic status. That is a strategy employed by the third and fourth view. The fifth view argues that one can only adopt strategies particular to a tradition.

Summary and Evaluation of the Book

The first two views are focused on justification, which is a first-person positive epistemic status that is modeled after subjects' ability to provide a defense of why they have their beliefs. To provide such a defense, arguably one must have access to one's reasons or evidence; hence, each of the first two views is about Internalist justification, which requires that subjects have some kind of access to whatever it is that gives their beliefs a positive epistemic status. The first two views are also Evidentialist and Foundationalist, which means that it is the strength of one's evidence that justifies all of one's beliefs except for the foundational beliefs, which are basic/foundational evidence; those beliefs justify but are not themselves justified by other beliefs. So, both views share the view that there are foundational or "basic" pieces of evidence that allow subjects to justify their beliefs if they have the right kind of access to the kind of support involved. Their only disagreement is over what characterizes these foundational pieces of evidence.

One of the first two views is Phenomenal Conservatism (PC), defended by Logan Gage and Blake McAllister (G&M). (The view is presented second in the book, but I recommend reading it first). According to their view, a proposition is foundational/basic evidence to the extent that it seems to the subject to be true. How is a proposition's seeming to be true connected to whether the subject is justified in believing that proposition? G&M state their view three different ways:

- 1) The proposition's seeming to be true gives just some degree of justification to that proposition for the subject (102, 214),
- 2) The degree of justification the subject has for believing the proposition is proportional to how strongly the proposition seems true to the subject (37), and
- 3) The seeming to be true provides the subject with enough justification for believing the proposition unless it is defeated by other evidence/seemings (71).

G&M are clear that their view does not connect justification with truth (35), and that the best we can do is believe on the basis of what it seems to us to be true (105). Although PC is a normative view—a view about what one ought to, or is permitted to, believe—G&M frequently use how people actually do form beliefs to guide which normative epistemological view one should adopt. They state that their view accounts for commonsense beliefs (62): “ordinary people” do not actually base their commonsense beliefs, like the belief that there is an external world (66), on arguments for those beliefs, and PC makes it so that these commonsense beliefs held by ordinary people are justified.

One of the most common critiques of Phenomenal Conservatism is that it is an overly permissive view of justification. So, of course it is not difficult to justify religious beliefs, but it also opens up the gates widely to allow a host of other beliefs to be justified as well. Wide is the gate that leads to justification, and many enter through it. According to this objection, almost anything can seem to be true, and according to PC almost anything would thus be justified, but certainly not just anything can be justified, so PC as a normative theory is false. In reply, G&M appeal again to actual practices: “Typical human beings are cautious about radically new or foreign experiences” (101).

Classical Evidentialism (defended by John DePoe) presents a narrow gate view of justification according to which properly basic evidence must be true (rather than just seeming to be true), and subjects must be directly acquainted with that evidence's truth. DePoe critiques PC by saying that if we were discussing molecular biology or renaissance history (rather than religious beliefs), we would not endorse theories according to which one's belief is justified as long as it seems to be true (85). Instead, we would have more rigorous standards that guaranteed a connection to truth (55), and we should enforce the same rigorous standards with respect to religious beliefs. This view is criticized by G&M for being so narrow that one could not justify commonsense beliefs and for making justification too difficult for most people (37). Narrow are these gates that lead to justification, and only a few find it.

Although these first two views are incompatible, the following three views are not essentially incompatible with any other views.

The third view, Proper Functionalism (defended by Tyler McNabb), is focused on warrant, not justification (which was the focus of the previous two views). Warrant is a third-person positive epistemic status that makes a true belief an instance of knowledge, and it is different from justification, since one might not need to defend one's beliefs to have knowledge.

McNabb provides conditions for warrant that matches Plantinga's (109) and which are compatible with mundane ways of knowing. These conditions are Externalist conditions, which means that the subject can meet the conditions and thus have a positive epistemic status even if the subject does not have access to whatever it is that gives their belief the positive epistemic status. McNabb also states that if Christianity is true, each person meets the conditions for warrant. So, if Christianity is true, then Christians can know religious truths. An odd, perhaps

deal-breaking feature of this view is that one can have good reasons to believe their faculties are unreliable but still have warrant as long as they remain confident in their own faculties (87, 117, 146). It seems, then, that stubborn dogmatism actually gives one's beliefs a stronger epistemic status on McNabb's view.

McNabb's view is compatible with any of the previous two (they are about different statuses—justification and warrant, respectively). In fact, McNabb affirms that he is merely presenting his view of warrant, that his view of justification matches Gage and McAllister's (88), and that he believes all the contributors besides DePoe agree with him (141). It is perhaps for this reason that McNabb presents the conditions for warrant and responds to objections instead of arguing for those conditions—there is no need to do so if the other contributors agree with him. DePoe, the exception, believes that Externalism (and thus McNabb's conditions for warrant) is “practically useless,” (124) “dehumanizing,” (124) and “hardly fertile ground for productive religious dialogue,” (125) but he does not argue that McNabb's view is false.

The fourth view, Covenental Epistemology (presented by K. Scott Oliphint) is a distinctively Christian account of the conditions under which can know God. According to the account, God has revealed himself both to creatures and, since we are made in God's image, in creatures. We thereby already possess knowledge of God through direct acquaintance (160) unless we have suppressed this knowledge, which we do only as a result of sin. Oliphant maintains that knowledge of God is more certain and better known than any piece of evidence on which one would base one's belief in God (185). Failure to know God is primarily a matter of the will or heart rather than the mind (158, 162). Oliphant is not opposed to having beliefs or even knowledge about God as a result of having evidence; it is just that arguments and reasons are

tools to enable God to open the eyes of someone already in direct acquaintance with God and thus to enable that person to know God (164 n. 11). “[I]nstead of thinking of knowledge as downstream from our beliefs, we should see, instead, that God has created us as creatures who inevitably *know* and know Him, at the outset” (134, emphasis in original).

This picture of humans’ epistemic relationship to God seems compatible with the other views presented, albeit from a different perspective. Perhaps both what Oliphint says is true and by examining the evidence (via Evidentialism) or believing steadfastly (via Proper Functionalism) one thereby removes obstacles that would prevent one from knowing God via direct acquaintance. The disagreements between Oliphant’s view and the others are 1) whether such a perspective is needed in the religious epistemology debate—since we can know about psychology, medicine, science, and math via mundane epistemic methods (173), there seems to be no need to bring Scripture into the debateⁱ—and 2) scriptural interpretation, though the contributors do not delve deeply into the interpretive issues.

The final view, Tradition-Based Perspectivalism (presented by Erik Baldwin), is a MacIntyre-inspired metaepistemological view according to which “there is no tradition-independent way to evaluate the epistemic merits of our religious beliefs...no such thing as religious epistemology-as-such that applies universally across all religious traditions” (191). Baldwin gives an argument from elimination for his view (225): either Tradition-Based Perspectivalism is true, or “the standards of substantive rationality hold everywhere equally and universally” (200), or “both rationality and truth [are] intellectual artifacts” (200). Baldwin maintains that the last view cannot be an intellectual research project without undermining itself, and the view that the standards of rationality are consistent across traditions (the second view in the disjunction above)

is false because one must begin a theory with foundational beliefs that are rooted in one's tradition and historical context. It seems that Baldwin takes that rooting claim to support the view that there is no tradition-independent epistemology. I cannot find in the text a reason for endorsing that inference, but Baldwin does state that his arguments, "being broadly inductive and dialectical, aren't formally valid. But tradition-based inquiry is and must be dialectical" (225).

The other contributors are opposed to Tradition-Based Perspectivalism even though their views are compatible with it; Phenomenal Conservatism, for example, might be rational within one tradition but not another. In fact, Tradition-Based Perspectivalism is identified by McNabb as orthogonal to the first-order epistemological views of the previous four contributors (213). Nevertheless, every one of the other contributors suggests that their epistemological view is the one whose rationality transcends all cultures (210, 214, 218, 222). So, although the other contributors' views as such are compatible with Baldwin's metaepistemological view, those other contributors take issue with Baldwin's metaepistemological relativity. DePoe also claims that one can have tradition-independent rational beliefs about math, plant biology, and airplane operation, so it seems unnecessary to hold to a tradition-dependent metaepistemology about religious beliefs.

Overall, this book might serve as a good starting point in an upper-level undergraduate class on Religious Epistemology, since there is less use of jargon and technical language than one will find in earlier proponents of the above views (e.g., Richard Swinburne, Chris Tucker, Alvin Plantinga, Cornelius Van Til, Alasdair MacIntyre). If the reader chooses to read the book, I advise reading each of the five views first before reading the replies to each view (unless the reader is already familiar with the views), and if the book is used as a class text, beware that

there are several issues to sort out—authors will sometimes misrepresent a view (and sometimes authors are inconsistent or unclear in their presentation of their own view), arguments are sometimes unclear or incomplete until one has read their response to all the replies (and sometimes unclear after that), and there are many debates that are not central to the truth of the views themselves (e.g., about the usefulness/importance of another view, about one author’s scriptural interpretation, about whether a view is represented correctly). Nevertheless, this would be a helpful beginning text for students to hear views represented with the guidance of a specialist to help sort things out, before moving on to some of the original texts.

ⁱ This might be a charitable interpretation of Gage & McAllister’s reply. G&M represent Oliphant as saying that “epistemological insight is exclusively gained through the aid of Scripture” (173), and reply to that representation. This reply is summarized in the endnoted text. It is unclear, however, whether by replying to the view in the quote above G&M are responding to the view that one can learn about how people know only by means of Scripture (not Oliphant’s position) or the view that the most insightful perspective on how people know is a perspective that begins only from Scripture (which seems to be Oliphant’s position). I have represented G&M’s reply to the above quote as if they were representing Oliphant as holding the latter view.