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**Warrant and Non-function: A Critique of the *Sensus Divinitatis* in  
Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology**

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# **Warrant and Non-function: A Critique of the *Sensus Divinitatis* in Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology**

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, there has been a surge in attempting to demonstrate how a theistic belief can be held rationally apart from classical proofs. Championed by philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff,<sup>1</sup> Reformed Epistemology attempts to defend a God-belief (hereafter GB) as properly basic, which is therefore justified and warranted apart from traditional argumentation. I take a GB to be that common theistic belief that Aquinas referred to when he said that a person can know in a "...general and confused way that God exists."<sup>2</sup> This GB could also include simple beliefs that may entail God's existence: "I believe God created the world" would be one example. Plantinga was of the mind that there would never be sufficient evidence for this type of GB that could appease the demands of the evidentialist. With this in view, he put forward a position of religious epistemology that attempts to show how a GB can be on par with other beliefs we have on a daily basis that are considered rational, even if devoid of argumentation. In this paper I focus on Plantinga's version of the RE position and analyze the accuracy of this type of religious epistemology. While he has constructed an impressive epistemological system, I argue that ultimately there are issues with his account because it posits a superfluous and

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<sup>1</sup> Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith And Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, 1st edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, English Dominican Province Translation edition (New York: Christian Classics, 1981). I, q. 2 a. 1, ad 1.

*ad hoc* cognitive faculty known as the *sensus divinitatis*. Plantinga thinks that if God exists and Christianity is true, then we should expect the *SD* to work in the way he sets it out. However, the superfluous nature of this cognitive faculty is demonstrated by the fact that there are perfectly good alternate accounts for a GB that meet the necessary conditions for warrant and do not include a philosophically novel cognitive faculty. Further, a potential warrant defeater will be considered for the RE account based on religious pluralism and the idea that humanity has a history of being wrong in assigning agency and religious belief to natural phenomenon. This warrant defeater provides motivation for thinking that the epistemic environment would be faulty in which the *sensus divinitatis* is said to operate. This thesis is defended by first looking closely at what Plantinga's RE entails, analyzing the necessity of the *sensus divinitatis* by looking at both perception and testimony models of GB, and by considering whether religious pluralism is a potential warrant defeater for RE.

## **2. Reformed Epistemology**

### *2.1 Basic Beliefs and Justification*

Essential to Plantinga's RE account is the idea of basic beliefs. The basic belief terminology comes from the epistemological theory known as foundationalism. In the foundationalist account, there are some beliefs that are basic while others are not.<sup>3</sup> The beliefs that are basic do not require any inference from prior beliefs in order to be held

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<sup>3</sup> James F. Sennett, ed., *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, 58786th edition (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans-Lightning Source, 1998), 129.

rationally. On the other hand, if a belief is not basic, then it can only be arrived at by inferring from one of the other basic beliefs. In other words, basic beliefs provide the foundation for all other beliefs to subsequently be constructed. RE attempts to place a GB as a properly basic. We can imagine this by using the metaphor of a ladder. Whatever belief is basic in this system would remain on the ground below the ladder. This signifies the fact that these basic beliefs will always be your starting point when you begin to climb upwards. When you infer a belief from another basic belief, you begin to climb this ladder. Each step on the ladder signifies a belief system that is being built from prior beliefs. This is where the major difference between an evidentialist and a RE theory is most visible. An evidentialist account for the belief in God would be arrived at much higher up the ladder of beliefs, whereas the RE account wants to insert the GB on the ground below the ladder.

One key part of Plantinga's RE account involves the idea of a special God-given cognitive faculty known as the *sensus divinitatis* (hereafter *SD*). This mechanism was put in place by God to help guide us towards a GB. He draws this part of his theory from the theologian John Calvin, who came to believe that the *SD* was taught by the author of the biblical book of Romans. Plantinga explains this part of his position when says:

The basic idea is that there is a kind of faculty or a cognitive mechanism, what Calvin calls, a *sensus divinitatis* or sense of divinity, which in a wide variety of circumstances produces in us beliefs about God. These circumstances, we might say, trigger the disposition to form the beliefs in question; they form the occasion on which those beliefs arise.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2015), 33.

He says further, “The central feature of this model is the stipulation that God has created us human beings with a belief-producing process or source of belief... This source works under various conditions to produce beliefs about God, including beliefs that immediately entail his existence.”<sup>5</sup> He believes that this cognitive faculty is responsible for producing a GB. The *SD* is the reason for the fact that some people just seem to find themselves with this belief about God while in certain circumstances. These types of circumstances produce the stimuli that trigger the *SD*. These instances have a wide range of possibilities but can include things like, observing the glories of nature, experiencing something marvelous, experiencing an act of justice, etc.<sup>6</sup> If this was the case, then it would be possible for someone to suddenly be overwhelmed by the idea that they believe in God. For example, you are sitting in your yard looking at the stars and beauty of the night sky, and you begin to find yourself believing in God. This would be the *SD* at work. Plantinga explains this well when he says,

It isn't that one notes some feature of the Australian outback – that it is ancient and brooding for example – and draws the conclusion that God exists. It is rather that upon the perception of the night sky or the mountain vista or the tiny flowers, these beliefs just arise within us. They arise in these circumstances; they are not conclusions from them.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, this belief that arose would be considered basic and not requiring any further argument. Much seeing a clock on the wall and believing that it is there, believing in God is basic and therefore justified. The person that finds themselves believing in God in this

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<sup>5</sup> Plantinga, 45.

<sup>6</sup> Plantinga, 46.

<sup>7</sup> Plantinga, 35.

way would have no further work to do in order to prove that their belief is rational and could ask, “what more do I need to prove in order to be warranted and rationally responsible?” For Plantinga, the *SD* is essentially operating as an input-output device.<sup>8</sup> It takes in the circumstances mentioned above as an input and produces a theistic belief as an output.

## 2.2 Warrant

The other half of what RE argues for is that a properly basic GB is not only justified but also warranted by conditions that the *SD* meets. First, Plantinga describes warrant as the thing or special ingredient that turns a justified true belief into knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Further, warrant is achieved by a view known as proper functionalism.<sup>10</sup> In essence, this account of warrant states that a belief is considered to have warrant if it is produced by properly working cognitive functions that are operating in a proper environment.<sup>11</sup> The cognitive faculties of a person forming a belief cannot be damaged or in an environment that would hinder the proper functioning of those faculties. For example, if someone was in a car accident and suffered head trauma, their cognitive faculties would not be in a state to where warrant could be achieved. Plantinga also states that “the segment of the design plan governing the production of that belief is aimed at the production of true

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<sup>8</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 1st edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 174.

<sup>9</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate*, 1 Edition (New York: Oxford University Press USA, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Alvin Plantinga, ed., “Why We Need Proper Function,” *Noûs* 27, no. 1 (1993): 66–82.

<sup>11</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 1st edition (New York: Oxford University Press, U.S.A., 1993).

beliefs, and there is a high statistical probability that a belief produced under those conditions will be true.”<sup>12</sup> Here, Plantinga has in mind that we need a reliability condition to be met as well. He imagines a possible world where our faculties have been designed by an imperfect deity, and that the god has designed our faculties poorly so that even when they are functioning properly in a proper environment, we are still forming mostly false beliefs. Plantinga’s conditions for warrant can now be summarized like this:

The belief must be:

1. Produced by correctly functioning cognitive faculties
2. Produced in a favorable environment
3. Produced by cognitive faculties operating according to their design plan
4. Produced by a reliable cognitive faculty.

For Plantinga, the *SD* is the cognitive faculty that needs to meet these requirements for a warranted GB. Given that God exists and created this faculty, the *SD* is a correctly functioning cognitive faculty that functions according to its design plan. Also, it is operating in the environment in which God created it. Lastly, Plantinga would say that the *SD* is reliable because it was created by an all-powerful God who’s aim was for this faculty to produce truth.

Moreover, an important part of Plantinga’s account of warrant is that the knower does not need to be aware of whether all these conditions are met for proper

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<sup>12</sup> Plantinga, 46–47.

functionalism. This is crucial to his claim because he believes that one does not have to be aware of the truth of *SD* or be able to defend it in order to have a warranted GB. This is unnecessary to make his point about warrant. If a person who forms a belief in God does so with properly functioning cognitive faculties in a proper environment and aimed at truth, then the GB is warranted on Plantinga's view.

### **3. The Superfluity of the Sensus Divinitatis**

#### *3.1 Extra Cognitive Faculty*

As mentioned above, essential to Plantinga's account is the idea of a God-given cognitive faculty which was designed to produce theistic beliefs in certain environments. However, there are some good reasons to think that the *SD* theory is unnecessary and *ad hoc*. First, the idea of God creating humanity with this particular cognitive faculty, presupposes the idea that God needed to do this in order for people to be able to hold a warranted theistic belief. That is to say, God's plan for having humanity come to hold a belief in him, was to add a cognitive faculty, separate from reasoning, perception, etc., that is designed for producing a warranted theistic belief. Why should we think this is the case? It does not seem necessary for God to create a separate cognitive faculty for this purpose. For example, God could have (just as easily) created humanity with the ability to form theistic beliefs by reason and perception alone. For example, God, (assuming he is all powerful) who had full control over determining how to create humanity, could have given undeniable signs in his creation that leaves people warranted in believing in him. In fact, Plantinga himself clearly believes these types of cognitive mechanisms (reason, perception, etc) are important because they operate within his RE account.

Perception is at work when someone gazes at the stars and then forms a belief that a creator God exists. However, the relationship between the *SD* and the other faculties is also quite ill-defined in Plantinga's work. It is not clear what the order of operations is for how it interreacts with perception. When someone perceives the night sky, does the *SD* then take over in the place of reason in order to output a GB?

### *3.2 Perception Model*

In order to demonstrate the superfluity of the *SD*, we need take the time to construct a model that satisfies Plantinga's four conditions of warrant without positing this extra cognitive faculty. William Alston (who has appeared alongside Plantinga in many publications on RE) defends a perception model, which aims at showing how putative direct awareness of God can provide justification for certain types of beliefs in God.<sup>13</sup> Alston states his goal when he says, "And so far as I can see, the only way of arguing, from that standpoint, that people do genuinely perceive God is to argue for the epistemological position that beliefs formed on the basis of such (putative) perceptions are (prima facie) justified."<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that Alston is not necessarily after the same goal as Plantinga because Alston aims to show these types of beliefs in God are justified. Moreover, Alston does not use the concept of warrant when defending his theory.

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<sup>13</sup> William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, 1st edition (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 9.

<sup>14</sup> Alston, 10.

Moving towards that goal, Alston points out the important characteristics of perception which separates it from reasoning. For example, seeing my car in the distance (perception) is distinct from reasoning about my car, thinking about my car, or forming mental images of it. Alston says that this marks the difference between “presence and absence.”<sup>15</sup> If I stand in front of my car and with my eyes closed and then open them, I am suddenly *presented* with the object. That is to say, it appears in my visual field and certain characteristics about it also appear to me (it is grey, two door, etc). In the same way, this distinction is present when people discuss experiencing God. Someone might say, “God was fully present to me during the church service.” Or, “I could clearly see God after experiencing his beauty in his creation.” Contrast this with a statement like, “I experienced grace which I believe comes from God’s love for me.” The latter is clearly an example of someone reasoning to this conclusion, whereas the former examples demonstrate how God was *presented* to these people in a direct way. This distinction goes a long way in dispelling the critiques of religious experience who claim people experiencing something and then later reason that it must have been God.

Second, Alston points out that in typical sense perception scenarios, phenomenal qualities (shapes, colors, smells, etc.) are present with the object. However, in these God examples, it seems impossible to point out any phenomenal qualities that are present with a spiritual being. Alston notes that there are phenomenal qualities sure, but there are also comparative qualities that are involved in sense perception. Comparative qualities are the

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<sup>15</sup> Alston, 15.

ways in which the object can be expected to appear.<sup>16</sup> Alston gives the example: “This tie looks red (to me now) could be to say, ‘This tie looks to me now as a red tie would be expected to look under normal conditions.’”<sup>17</sup> In this example, we are not using the phenomenal concept of red. Instead, we are using objective concepts of red tie and characterizing this look by comparing it with other looks characterized in these objective terms. To further illustrate this with sense perception, Alston gives these examples: “I could correctly report that X looked like a house or a Porsche or a bald eagle or tasted like a white Burgundy or sounded like Handel, thereby giving you an idea of how it looked, tasted, or sounded.”<sup>18</sup> What is important here, is that all of this is being done without the use of phenomenal concepts. Applying this to experiencing God, most people use comparative concepts to specify how God appeared to them. They are essentially saying, “I was conscious of God presenting himself in the way I would expect an all-powerful, loving, good, deity to be presented.”

The final piece of the model depends on how these externalist questions are answered. If God exists, (1) Is it possible that God should be what is appearing to people in these experiences? (2) Is it possible that God should figure in the causation of that experience in such a way as to count as what is perceived? (3) Is it possible that that experience should give rise to beliefs about God?<sup>19</sup> In summarizing Alston’s answer to these questions, this will also give us insight into whether this perception model will

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<sup>16</sup> Alston, 45.

<sup>17</sup> Alston, 45.

<sup>18</sup> Alston, 46.

<sup>19</sup> Alston, 58.

satisfy Plantinga's four conditions for warrant. To answer (1), Alston essentially says that we do not have any reason to suspect that it would be impossible for God to appear to people in these ways.<sup>20</sup> There appear to be no *a priori* rules about what can and cannot appear to our experience. Unless there are any strong negative arguments, the possibility is *prima facie* sound. Moving on, questions (2) and (3) can be answered together. If God does exist, then it is reasonable to think that he would be causally involved in these experiences. Classical theistic truths hold that God is causally involved in governing the world. Therefore, we can expect the intentional effort made by God to present himself to people in order that they would believe in him. Further, it would follow from this as an answer to (3), that God would be the object of beliefs in these experiences.

How does this show that Plantinga's use of the *SD* is unnecessary? As we have seen, Alston has put forward a model that demonstrates how a general definition of perception can apply to experiences of God. What is important for this paper is to show that the perception model can meet the Plantingan conditions for warrant. On Plantinga's proper functionalism account, he would agree that perceptual experiences where our sense perception is operating correctly, and in a favorable environment, could potentially produce warrant. What isn't as obvious is determining what it means for perception to be operating according to its intended design plan. With the *SD*, God created this cognitive faculty with the purpose of producing belief in himself. Can the same be said about perception? Again, granting that God does exist, it isn't farfetched to say that one of the intended functions of perception is to produce GBs. Obviously, perception was created to

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<sup>20</sup> Alston, 59.

help us take in our physical surroundings, but there also exists the possibility (especially given Alston's model) that God created perception with the intent that he would appear to us through this cognitive faculty. As I explain below, there are good biblical reasons for thinking this is the case as well. Thus, we can say that perception correctly operates according to its design plan when it produces an experience of God. Finally, Plantinga also believes in the reliability of sense perception based off the previous conditions as he expresses in *Warrant: The Current Debate*.<sup>21</sup>

We now have good reason for believing that Plantinga's addition of the *SD* is unnecessary for having a warranted belief in God. Alston's perception model gives us a way to meet the conditions of warrant without having to add the extra burden of an ill-defined and philosophically novel, cognitive faculty.

### 3.3 Romans 1

Perhaps Plantinga could respond that he thinks there is good reason to think God created humanity with this special cognitive faculty because he holds the Bible as true. That is to say, the fact that Romans 1 teaches *SD* means he has reason to believe God did create us with this additional mechanism. This, of course, is how John Calvin came to adopt the *SD* in his theology. Calvin quotes from Romans 1, which says, "For what can be known about God is plain to them (humankind), because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (Romans 1:19-20).

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<sup>21</sup> Plantinga, *Warrant*, 195.

From this passage Calvin concludes, “There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty.” (*Institutes* I, iii, 1, p.44). Plantinga, in agreement with Calvin, concludes that Romans 1 supports the *SD*.

However, on the surface, it isn’t clear that Romans 1 says anything about an intrinsic cognitive mechanism that produces belief in God. In fact, it seems to teach that by *perception* people can know that God exists. The author of Romans is saying that God’s characteristics can be perceived by looking at his creation. Dunn, commenting on Romans 1 says this, “That is to say, however precisely the phrase *νοούμενα καθορᾶται* should be rendered (“clearly perceived”), it is scarcely possible that Paul (the author of Romans) did not intend his readers to think in terms of some kind of rational perception of the fuller reality in and behind the created cosmos.”<sup>22</sup> I think Dunn is correct, and this leads me to believe that Plantinga is doing poor exegeses in his reading of Romans 1 and taking some liberties in his interpretation of Calvin. There is no reason to believe from this passage that God implanted a special cognitive mechanism in humanity that would aid in producing belief in himself. Instead, like the above example, Romans 1 is teaching that God has left visible signs (i.e., his creation) in order for people to perceive and discern that he exists. Let’s look at Plantinga’s stargazing example again. Someone, on a very clear night, sees the grandeur of the stars like never before and perceives that this beauty directly tied to that of a divine creator. The perception model is completely in line with what Romans 1 is teaching and does not need the addition of the *SD* to make sense

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<sup>22</sup> James D. G. Dunn et al., *Romans 1-8, Volume 38A*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, David Allen Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker (Zondervan Academic, 2015), 58.

of what is happening in the formation of this theistic belief. In summary, even if one takes the Bible to be true, there are not good reasons for believing that chapter 1 of Romans teaches the existence of the *SD*.

### *3.4 Testimonial Knowledge*

It becomes even more clear that we do not need an extra cognitive faculty in order to have theistic knowledge when considering knowledge received by testimony. Deeper into the development of his RE position, Plantinga gives an account of how someone is warranted in believing Christian truths that are discovered within the pages of the Bible. Here, he begins to shift the specific language of *SD* and moves into what he calls the “Extended A/C model” or the “testimonial model.”<sup>23</sup> Much like *SD*, Plantinga thinks the testimonial model also provides warrant for holding basic beliefs concerning theism. However, these beliefs are more specific theological positions, specific to Christianity, which are discovered through the reading of Scripture. He believes that in these cases, warrant is derived from reliable testimony. Specifically, there is testimony from God who is working through the writers of each individual book of the bible.<sup>24</sup> Plantinga illustrates this when he says, “On the model, there is both Scripture and the divine activity leading to human belief. God himself is the principal author of Scripture. Scripture is most importantly a message, a communication from God to humankind; Scripture is a word from the Lord. But then this is just a special case of the pervasive process of testimony,

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<sup>23</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 265.

<sup>24</sup> Plantinga, 249.

by which, as a matter of fact, we learn most of what we know.”<sup>25</sup> The most important part of this quote is the fact that Plantinga not only has a testimonial model built into his RE account, but that also he thinks testimony is generally reliable and capable of producing basic knowledge.

This admission by Plantinga concerning testimony has major implications for the necessity of the *SD*. I believe there are two different ways in which testimony can be shown to do the work of Plantinga’s model. First, because of the reality of scripture, this means that there are *de facto* other ways that God has put in place for us to have theistic knowledge without the need of the *SD*. The idea that God exists is clearly laid out in multiple ways throughout the Bible. If someone reads the first chapter of the Bible, they would already be receiving testimonial knowledge that a deity does exist. According to Plantinga, this person would be warranted in holding this GB.<sup>26</sup>

Second, I think this is more evidence that the *SD* is completely unnecessary in the type of GB producing environments that were discussed above. Returning to the stargazing example, it now seems completely reasonable to believe that God could communicate knowledge of his existence through his divine self-testimony through his creation. Imagine someone looks up at the grandeur of the night sky and comes away with the belief that there must be a divine creator who is responsible for the beauty of the stars. In theology, this type of self-testimony is called God’s revelation. Perhaps God did design the universe in such a way to where he is constantly giving self-testimony through

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<sup>25</sup> Plantinga, 251.

<sup>26</sup> Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 89.

his creation that he exists. This is certainly the type of language that the Bible uses. For example, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the expanse proclaims the work of his hands.”<sup>27</sup>

A model of divine self-testimony in these types of Plantingan belief-producing environments will be very helpful in supporting this latter claim. Rolfe King puts forward an argument that illustrates how all knowledge of God (excluding natural theology) is a direct result of God’s self-testimony.<sup>28</sup> In particular, King is directly linking the revelation of God with testimony. He begins by defining direct testimony as involving “telling someone that something is the case or indicating that this is so.” Also, indirect testimony is where “someone arranges for, or just permits it, that someone will be informed about something, or have something shown to them.”<sup>29</sup> Self-testimony for King is either direct or indirect and is concerned with someone telling another person about themselves.<sup>30</sup> Testimony can be taken to involve propositional, verbal, or signs, but it can also involve non-verbal signs. This includes self-testimony because there can be situations where someone could “indicate by tapping that they are present or give a thumbs-up sign to indicate they are doing alright.”<sup>31</sup> Importantly, King then defines divine self-testimony to be when God either gives verbal or non-verbal signs through which knowledge of God might be realized.

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<sup>27</sup> CSB Bibles by Holman, *CSB*, Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2020). Psalm 19:1

<sup>28</sup> Rolfe King, “Divine Self-Testimony and the Knowledge of God,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 74, no. 3 (2013): 279–95.

<sup>29</sup> King, 281.

<sup>30</sup> King, 281.

<sup>31</sup> King, 281.

With these definitions in place, King lays out the argument that all knowledge of God, excluding natural theology, is from divine self-testimony. It is important to quote his argument at length:

The argument that follows the letters 'ENT stand for 'excluding knowledge based on natural theology'. The argument, which I shall refer to as 'the God argument' is this:

(1) Unless God permits an act, or acts, of his to reveal his intentions, his intentions cannot be known [ENT].

(2) For all divine acts, *a*, if God permits it that *a* reveals his intention, *i*, then *a* is a form of divine self-testimony.

(3) From (1) and (2) it follows that God's intentions can only be known [ENT] if they are revealed by acts that are a form of divine self-testimony.

(4) It is necessary to have some knowledge of God's intentions to have any knowledge of God [ENT],

(5) From (3) and (4) it follows that there can be no knowledge of God [ENT] without some form of divine self-testimony.<sup>32</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this paper to defend all of King's premises individually. However, (1), (2), and (3) seem very clear. However, (4) is not quite as clear but can be quickly defended. It seems true that knowledge of God would involve knowledge of God's attributes and power. Consequently, one cannot know about God's character unless one also knows something about his intentions. If one knows that God is love, then one also knows God must have loving intentions. Further, King points out that all knowledge of God must be based on actions that God has done. If we know things that God has done, we know something about how his acts were intentional.<sup>33</sup> With this, (5) follows

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<sup>32</sup> King, 281.

<sup>33</sup> King, 285.

from (3) and (4) and leaves us with the conclusion that knowledge of God [ENT] is always based on divine self-testimony.

Returning to Plantinga, we now have even more reason to believe that the *SD* is superfluous. Plantinga accepts testimony as a reliable source of knowledge (including knowledge about God in some cases). With King's divine self-testimony model and testimony derived from the scriptures, there are two more reasons for why Plantinga does not need to posit the notion of an additional cognitive faculty. It is clear that warranted belief in God can be gained through testimony.

#### **4. Potential Defeater: Religious Pluralism**

I want to finish this paper off by quickly expressing some worries I have concerning the effectiveness of RE accounts like Plantinga's. Even though I have demonstrated what I believe to be the unnecessary nature of the *SD*, it would also be beneficial to analyze a potential defeater for the model. Plantinga admits that while belief in God is properly basic, it is also open to defeat. In fact, he believes that we need to reflect on potential defeaters that come up in order to stay intellectually honest.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, suppose that someone offers a defeater for the belief that God exists. The intellectually honest person would need to reflect on that defeater. If the person reflects and realizes it is no longer rational to hold a belief in God, then that belief must be abandoned. On the other hand, if one spends time in reflection over a defeater but comes

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<sup>34</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 358.

away thinking that it actually does not serve as a defeater to a belief in God, then they can rationally continue to hold a GB.

A popular philosophical example of how defeaters should alter beliefs is the widget example. Imagine there are widgets on a conveyer belt, and they appear to me that they are blue. Proper functionalism says I am justified in believing they are blue. However, I learn new information that there is a blue light filter shining on the widgets to make them appear blue when in fact they are red. I now have a defeater for my belief that the widgets are blue that I can no longer rationally hold.

There are different types of defeaters that are possible, but my concerns are focused in on what is called a “warrant defeater.”<sup>35</sup> Plantinga describes warrant defeaters as being separate from rationality defeaters. He gives an example of this type of defeater by referring to Carl Ginet’s fake barn example:

You are driving through southern Wisconsin; you seem to see many fine barns. Fixing on a particular one, you say to yourself, “That is a splendid barn.” What you don’t know, however, is that the local Wisconsinites have erected many clever barn facades (from the road indistinguishable from real barns) to make themselves look more prosperous. What you are looking at is a barn, and not a façade. Still, you don’t *know* that it is a barn; it is only by sheer serendipitous good fortune that the belief you form is true. (You might just as well have been looking at a barn facade – indeed, you might better have been looking at a barn facade, because the ratio of facades to barns in this area is 3:1<sup>36</sup>)

Plantinga says that the presence of the fake barns is a warrant defeater for you.

Plantinga also says of this fake barn country example, that the number of fake barns proves that this type of epistemic environment was unfavorable for producing a

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<sup>35</sup> Plantinga, 359.

<sup>36</sup> Plantinga, 360.

warranted belief. In the same way, I believe there is reason to have concern over how the existence of religious pluralism might influence the reliability of the epistemic environment in which religious beliefs arise. Humanity is bad at getting it right when it comes to beliefs about hidden agency based on experiences. In one way, this can be seen by the numerous claims of supernatural or hidden agency experiences in the world. I could argue that most of the claims or experiences have been proven wrong or debunked. Since humanity has such a bad track record, this provides a warrant defeater for any belief arising out of such an experience, including a GB. There is good reason to infer that the environment in which these types of beliefs arise is not favorable for producing a true GB. Further, this comes to a point given the fact that many different conflicting religious beliefs arise from these types of processes Plantinga has in mind. Much like the barn facade example, there are many different religious beliefs that all claim to have knowledge of a divine being that exists. A lot of these theistic beliefs share very similar qualities (higher power, creator, etc.) However, upon closer inspection, there many conflicting ideas about that God is like depending on what religion you are a part of. Since there are so many conflicting ideas of God, they cannot all be true at the same time. Since they cannot all be true, this means there are many different false beliefs about God that are produced through this process. The question remains; does the amount of conflicting (and presumably false beliefs) make the environment unfavorable for producing a correct theistic belief in the same way that the existence of fake barns makes the environment unfavorable for producing correct barn beliefs?

I do believe that false religious beliefs are analogous to fake barns in that example. Again, the fact that fake barns exist is enough to show that the epistemic

environment is unfriendly for producing warranted barn beliefs. In the same way, the fact that many different false beliefs about God and religion exist provides reason to think the epistemic environment for producing a warranted GB is unfavorable as well. For example, if a person in a God belief producing environment comes away with the belief that there is a divine creator who is loving and slow to anger. There is a separate scenario where it is possible that the person may have just as easily come away from a god belief producing environment with the belief that there is a creator God who evil and malicious. Clearly at least one of these two God beliefs must be false. Therefore, the existence of false God beliefs makes the environment a “fake God country.”

How could Plantinga or a defender of RE address this? In *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, Plantinga actually has a section on potential defeaters and includes religious pluralism.<sup>37</sup> However, he mainly focuses on moral and epistemic egoism and not on the idea that pluralism is evidence for human error and unfavorable an environment. Only at the end of the chapter does he mention the possibility that pluralism could serve as a defeater at first but then later serve to make the initial GB stronger. Plantinga says, “In this way, knowledge of the facts of pluralism could initially serve as a defeater; in the long run, however, it can have precisely the opposite effect. The facts of religious pluralism, therefore... do not constitute a defeater for Christian belief.”<sup>38</sup> While Plantinga does mention the possibility of pluralism being a defeater, he does not do so for the correct reasons. Epistemic or moral egoism is not the issue for RE. The issue is that

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<sup>37</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2015), 107.

<sup>38</sup> Plantinga, 114.

religious pluralism backs up the idea that humanity is really bad at getting this type of experiential-religious belief correct.

At this point this leaves us with two options regarding the effectiveness of an RE account. First, we can say that this warrant defeater provides a worry for meeting Plantinga's conditions of warrant if we were to adopt Alston and King's models. There is room to question whether the epistemic environment is conducive for a basic GB and whether testimony would in fact be reliable given the idea that depending on who you talk to would determine which religious belief you will be presented with. This leaves anyone defending Plantinga's view cheering because they would think the *SD* is the answer for avoiding this defeater. However, I think this "fake God country" defeater gives one reason to also think that the *SD* is never actually doing the job that Plantinga thinks. This is simply because the warrant defeater outlined above gives us good motivation for saying that the environment in which the *SD* would be said to operate in is actually faulty. This failure in Plantinga's warrant conditions would mean that the *SD* was never able to output a warranted GB. The conclusion then would be that if the "fake God country" warrant defeater is true, then the *SD* would be a non-functioning cognitive faculty in Plantinga's account.

## **5. Conclusion and Final Thoughts**

Plantinga's RE account attempts to place a belief in God in the category of properly basic. I believe there is merit in pointing to phenomenal conservatism and proper functionalism as epistemological accounts. However, as we have seen, Plantinga's account relies on positing an unnecessary additional cognitive faculty known as the *sensus divinitatis*. Plantinga thinks that if God exists and Christianity is true, then we

should expect the *SD* to work like he believes it should. However, this philosophically novel cognitive faculty has been shown to be unnecessary by the existence of the perception and testimonial models that successfully do the work instead. One interesting thing to point out is the potential relationship of Alston's and King's models. For the purpose of proving my argument, there need not be a relationship. However, Thomas Reid drew an interesting analogy between perception and testimony that I think is worth pointing out.

We have distinguished our perceptions into original and acquired; and language, into natural and artificial. Between acquired perception, and artificial language, there is a great analogy; but still a greater between original perception and natural language.<sup>39</sup>

I have simply shown that there are better options to the *SD* model by illustrating the perception and testimony models. However, it may be the case that these two models are both correct.

I ended the paper by addressing the fact is humanity has a bad track record at ascribing agency to things which turn out to be false. Coupled with the reality of religious pluralism, this provides troubling grounds for RE accounts. I believe Plantinga needs to demonstrate that we do not live in "fake god country" in order to ease these worries.

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<sup>39</sup> Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense: A Critical Edition*, ed. Derek R. Brookes, 1st edition (University Park, Pa: Penn State University Press, 2000), 190.

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