

The *Sensus Divinitatis* and Non-theistic Belief; or  
Turning Plantinga's Religious Epistemology against Christian Theism  
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*Abstract.* A key element of Plantinga's religious epistemology is that *de jure* objections to Theistic belief succeed only if *de facto* objections to Theistic belief succeed. He defends that element, in part, by claiming that human beings have an innate theistic faculty, the *sensus divinitatis*. In this paper, I argue that Plantinga's religious epistemology makes Christian Theism open to a *de facto* objection due to the characteristics and distribution of religious beliefs in the world. I defend my argument from a potential objection from skeptical theism, before concluding with a comparison to a similar argument.

*Key Words:* Alvin Plantinga; Reformed Epistemology; Sensus Divinitatis; Skeptical Theism

Alvin Plantinga distinguishes between two types of objections to theistic belief. *De jure* objections maintain that theistic belief is unjustified, unreasonable, or otherwise irrational. *De facto* objections maintain that theistic belief is false. One of the key claims of Plantinga's religious epistemology is that the success of these objections is not independent of one another. Specifically, *de jure* objections to theistic belief succeed only if *de facto* objections do.

Plantinga's argument for this conclusion has two parts. First, he claims that if Theism is true, then human beings have an innate theistic faculty—an innate faculty dedicated to producing theistic beliefs in a wide range of circumstances. Second, he claims if there is such a faculty, then theistic belief is warranted—it has enough of that quantity that turns true belief into knowledge. This second claim is backed up by his general theory of knowledge.

In this paper, I argue that Plantinga's religious epistemology makes Christian Theism susceptible to a *de facto* objection due to the characteristics and distribution of non-theistic beliefs. In section I, I sketch Plantinga's religious epistemology, paying attention to the role of an innate theistic faculty. I indicate how Plantinga thinks that both Christian Theism and Theism predict the existence of an innate theistic faculty.

In section II, I argue that the characteristics and distribution of non-theistic belief is strong evidence against the existence of such a faculty and, by extension, Christian Theism. Aware of this evidence, Plantinga and others propose that Sin interferes with the faculty; so even if there is such a faculty, we should expect non-theistic belief. I consider three proposals for how Sin might explain non-theistic belief and criticize each. In section III, I consider whether my argument is vulnerable to "skeptical theism" like objections; I argue that it is not, though an analogous argument against Theism is vulnerable. Lastly, in section IV, I compare my argument to one by Stephen Maitzen.

### **I. Plantinga's Grand Conditionals**

Beliefs can have a variety of epistemic statuses. Perhaps chief amongst them is being true or false. But there are many other statuses such as being rational or irrational, justified or unjustified, virtuously formed, reliably maintained, responsibly acquired, or even known. An important issue in epistemology is how these statuses are related. A common view is that true

belief is necessary for knowledge but not sufficient. But what other statuses might be necessary for knowledge—and even how they relate to one another—are live questions in epistemology.

Throughout his publications (1967, 1983, 2000, 2008, 2015), Alvin Plantinga examines the epistemic status of religious beliefs. Some of Plantinga's most important claims *link* the epistemic statuses of theistic beliefs. Specifically, in his (2000), Plantinga claims that if theistic beliefs are true, then they are reasonable, justified, or even constitute knowledge; by contrast, if theistic beliefs are false, they are unreasonable and do not constitute knowledge.

Even though these conditionals do not imply that Theism is true, they are significant for at least two reasons. First, if they are true, it is not in virtue of an analysis of the relevant epistemic statuses. Most epistemologists agree that even if a belief is true nothing follows about its being justified or reasonable. So, if these conditionals are true, there must be some other reason that explains why they are true. Second, as Plantinga himself emphasizes, these conditionals are dialectically significant. Plantinga distinguishes between a *de jure* objection to theistic belief—on which it is irrational or unjustified—and a *de facto* objection—on which it is false. A common thought is that one might endorse a *de jure* objection to theistic belief without committing oneself to a *de facto* objection. But if Plantinga's conditionals are right, this dialectical position is unstable. Any *de jure* objection to theistic belief succeeds only if a *de facto* objection to theistic belief does so as well.

Thus, a central claim of Plantinga's religious epistemology is (2000: 188-190; 2010: 679; 2015: ix, x, 39-40):

*The Theism Conditional*: If Theism is true, then theistic belief is warranted. (See also Plantinga (1983: 81) Plantinga and Tooley (2008: 13, 156, 177), Clark (1990: 148-151), Bergmann (2012: 538-40), compare McNabb (2018: 21-22), Clark (2019: 94)). Three clarifications of *The Theism Conditional* are necessary. First, a warranted belief is a belief that has sufficient qualities of "warrant"—that feature of beliefs that, when had in suitable degree, is sufficient for knowledge. Second, theistic belief is belief in Theism, where Theism is, roughly, that there is one God, that God is a person, the world is distinct from God and God created it out of nothing, and that God has superior qualities such as being all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good (cf. Plantinga and Tooley (2008: 1-5)). Third, though Plantinga doesn't explicitly say this, the consequent of *The Theism Conditional* should be understood as a generic claim. It doesn't merely imply that there's *at least one* theistic belief that is warranted; and it doesn't imply that *all* theistic beliefs are warranted. Rather, it is a generic claim like cats have tails, tomatoes are red, and big cities have subways. Generics have an intermediate scope between existential and universal statements.<sup>1</sup>

*The Theism Conditional* need not be dialectically primitive. It can be defended by appeal to two further conditionals:

*Theism Faculty Conditional*: If Theism is true, then human beings have an innate theistic faculty.

*Theism Warrant Conditional*: If human beings have an innate theistic faculty, then theistic belief is warranted.

These conditionals imply *The Theism Conditional*. However, neither of these conditionals is dialectically primitive either.

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<sup>1</sup> One might think the consequent of *The Theism Conditional* should be weakened to: theistic belief is warranted unless defeated. None of the arguments of this paper would turn on weakening the conditional in this way. But notice that Plantinga doesn't think that theistic belief is defeated by standard objections; see Plantinga (2000: chp. 11).

*Theism Warrant Conditional* can be defended by appealing to Plantinga's general theory of warrant (Plantinga (1993a,b). Simplifying a great deal, the general theory of warrant is that a belief is warranted if it is produced by properly functioning faculties, in an appropriate environment, that are aimed at producing true beliefs. Plantinga's general theory of warrant is a foundationalist one, insofar as warrant does not require that one's belief bear positive epistemic relations to other beliefs. Plantinga's general theory of warrant is also an externalist one, insofar as warrant does not require that one have reflective access to facts about whether one's faculties are properly functioning.

Some discussions of Plantinga's religious epistemology get embroiled in general discussions of epistemology. These discussions normally criticize Plantinga's general theory of warrant thereby undercutting the *Theism Warrant Conditional*. Authors might object to either the foundationalist element (e.g. Pargetter (1990: 160-1) and Bagger (1999: chp. 3)) or the externalist element (e.g., Martin (1990: 156ff.) and Lee (1993: 143-150)). However, for purposes here, I will not be concerned with the general theory of warrant. So I will set these types of criticisms aside.

Plantinga spends less time defending the other subconditional:

*Theism Faculty Conditional*: If Theism is true, then human beings have an innate theistic faculty.

By "innate theistic faculty," I mean (i) a set of psychological mechanisms, processes, or methods, (ii) which are developmentally innate and almost universally had, and (iii) are also aimed at producing true beliefs about God specifically, (iv) whose stimulus conditions are widely realized across human societies. Plantinga claims that the stimulus conditions for this faculty include a number of things such as appreciating the beauty of nature, reading a religious text, introspecting upon one's own moral character, or even grave danger (2000: 174; 2015: 33-5). This characterization of the faculty is a broadly functionalist one, characterizing it in terms of dispositions, inputs, and outputs (compare Plantinga (2000: 175)). While I use the term 'innate theistic faculty,' Plantinga uses the term *sensus divinitatis*, or "sense of the divine." But his description of the *sensus divinitatis* clearly makes it an innate theistic faculty. But my terminology is a little more informative.<sup>2</sup>

Plantinga's defense of the *Theism Faculty Conditional* can be distilled into three steps:

- If Theism is true, then there are important activities involving theistic belief that it would be good for human beings to engage in.
- If there are important activities involving theistic belief that it would be good for human beings to engage in, then it would be good for human beings to have true beliefs about God.
- If it would be good for human beings to have true beliefs about God, then human beings have an innate theistic faculty.

For the first step, the important activities might involve worshipping God, praying to God, loving God, ruminating on God's commands or intentions, etc. It may not be that theistic belief is an entailment of these activities. But it may be that, given human nature, the most effective way to get people to participate in these activities is to get them to have theistic beliefs. For the second step, it may be that human beings could engage in the wrong activities or the right activities in the wrong way. True beliefs will help avoid such problems. For the last step, if God intended human beings to have true theistic beliefs, then God would make it easy for people to have them.

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<sup>2</sup> Additionally, some authors use the term '*sensus divinitatis*' in a way that doesn't refer to an innate theistic faculty (see, e.g., McAllister and Dougherty (2019)). I discuss those views in my (2024).

And a very effective way to make it easy for them to have such beliefs is to give them a dedicated innate faculty with widely realized stimulus conditions. Obviously, innate faculties are not the only ways that human beings form beliefs. People might construct abstract proofs as well; but ever since Aquinas (*SCG* I.4)—and probably before him—Theists have worried these other methods would not reach enough people. By contrast, innate faculties functioning in widely realized conditions is an effective means for ensuring that a wide range of people do form accurate or true cognitive attitudes of the right kind. Thus, it is entirely expectable that God would utilize such a method.

So Plantinga defends:

*The Theism Conditional*: If Theism is true, then theistic belief is warranted.

By appealing to:

*Theism Faculty Conditional*: If Theism is true, then human beings have an innate faculty aimed at producing true beliefs about God.

*Theism Warrant Conditional*: If human beings have an innate faculty aimed at producing true beliefs about God, then theistic belief is warranted.

However, Plantinga's work also includes conditionals about Christian Theism. Fully characterizing Christian Theism is challenging. For purposes here, I'll take Christian Theism to be the conjunction of Theism with claims like: there is a Trinity; Jesus Christ is God; the Bible has divine authority; human beings suffer from sin; human sin needs to be redeemed for salvation; salvation includes an afterlife where people have a relation with God; salvation occurs by placing faith in God and Jesus Christ; and perhaps other claims included in various creeds. (My usage of the term follows Plantinga's; see Plantinga (2000: 202-3); Plantinga and Tooley (2008: 1-5).) The additional conditionals about Christian Theism include (compare Plantinga (2000: 242, 285; 2002: 128; 2008: 13-14)):

*The Christianity Conditional*: If Christian Theism is true, then theistic belief is warranted.

This conditional is just *The Theistic Conditional* with a stronger antecedent. Likewise, consider:

*Christianity Faculty Conditional*: If Christian Theism is true, then human beings have an innate theistic faculty.

*Theism Warrant Conditional*: If human beings have an innate theistic faculty, then theistic belief is warranted.

Again, the *Christianity Faculty Conditional* has a stronger antecedent—it assumes Christian Theism and not just Theism. (*Theism Warrant Conditional* is unchanged.) Together the *Christianity Faculty Conditional* and the *Theism Warrant Conditional* will imply *The Christianity Conditional*.

Though Plantinga spends less time defending it, the *Christianity Faculty Conditional* is quite plausible.<sup>3</sup> It is a standard part of Christian Theism that God's purposes or plans include the salvation of human beings, where salvation consists in an afterlife of union with God. Thus, God has an all-things-considered reason to bring about the salvation of human beings. It is further part of Christian Theism that this salvation involves various kinds of cognitive attitudes directed

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<sup>3</sup> Drange (1998: 59-71) provides texts from the Bible that would also support the *Christianity Faculty Conditional*. Plantinga also argues that if Christian Theism is true, then there is a further way of forming beliefs, involving the Holy spirit. This way produces beliefs in the specific contents of Christian Theism. A natural reading of Plantinga is that the innate theistic faculty produces generic theistic beliefs, which the Holy spirit builds upon to produce Christian theistic beliefs (cf. (2000: 168, 199)). Since I won't be focusing on Christian theistic beliefs, I ignore this element of Plantinga's theistic religious epistemology.

towards God such as belief or faith in God. Further, insofar as these cognitive attitudes are representations, the representations must be true or accurate.<sup>4</sup> Thus, God has an all-things-considered reason to bring about that human beings have various kinds of accurate or true cognitive attitudes directed towards God.

Recently, some philosophers of religion have argued that faith in certain propositions does not entail believing those propositions (see, e.g., Buchak (2012), Howard-Snyder (2013, 2016)). On those views, having faith that God exists does not necessarily imply a belief that God exists. Those views complicate, without undermining, these reasons for *Christian Faculty Conditional*. For even if faith does not require belief, it will still turn out that some of the most effective ways to achieve salvation will require accurate cognitive attitudes.

So Plantinga's work contains two sets of conditionals, grouped into three. The main difference between them is whether their antecedent involve just Theism or Christian Theism. Up to this point, most critical discussions of Plantinga's religious epistemology have focused on objections to the *Theism Warrant Conditional*. However, for this paper, I am mostly interested in the *Christianity Faculty Conditional*. I will not be objecting to this conditional; in fact, it is quite plausible. Rather, I will be using this conditional to produce a *de facto* objection to Christianity.

## II. The Christian Faculty Conditional and a *de facto* Objection

Plantinga uses conditionals like the *Christian Faculty Conditional* to defend Christianity from *de jure* objections that don't assume *de facto* objections. However, the *Christianity Faculty Conditional* also amounts to a prediction—it predicts that the world would be a certain way (human beings have an innate theistic faculty) given the truth of certain claims (Christian Theism). But predictions can be used to confirm or disconfirm a hypothesis like Christian Theism.

I argue that the character and distribution of non-theistic belief in the world strongly disconfirms Christian Theism. My overall argument is this:

1. *Christian Faculty Conditional*: If Christian Theism is true, then human beings have an innate theistic faculty.
2. Given the characteristics and distribution of non-theistic belief, it is very unlikely that there is an innate theistic faculty.
3. Therefore, given the characteristics and distribution of non-theistic belief, Christian Theism is very unlikely.

In this section, I give an argument for premise 2. Plantinga and others have a prepared response against premise 2 that appeals to Sin. I undercut that response by creating three more specific models of the role of Sin and arguing against each. In defending the second premise, I won't discuss potential evidence from cognitive science, specifically the cognitive science of religion; I discuss that potential evidence in a companion piece.<sup>5</sup>

*Prima facie*, there is strong evidence that there is not an innate faculty aimed at producing true beliefs about God. The evidence involves the characteristics and distribution of non-theistic belief in the world. By 'non-theistic belief,' I have in mind people who either (i) do not have religious beliefs or (ii) have religious beliefs that are not theistic. Simply put: the character and distribution of non-theistic belief in the world is not what one would expect if there is an innate

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<sup>4</sup> Or, at least, accurate is as possible given their subject matter. It might be that no beliefs could be fully accurate if God transcends human cognition too much. But even those who believe God transcends human cognition by a great deal still have some way of drawing a distinction between true believers and atheists/agnostics.

<sup>5</sup> For optimism about cognitive science of religion and an innate theistic faculty, Clark and Barrett (2011a, b), Evans (2012: 41), and Penner (2018: 129-130). For pessimism, see Dawes & Jong (2012) and Kvandal (2020).

faculty aimed at producing true theistic beliefs. It is important to be clear about this objection. The objection is not that the distribution of non-theistic beliefs provides a *defeater* for theistic belief, where a defeater is a reason that renders theistic belief unreasonable or unjustified. Perhaps the distribution of non-theistic beliefs does that; perhaps not. Rather, the objection is that the distribution of non-theistic belief in the world is, itself, strong evidence against the existence of an innate theistic faculty and, by extension, Christian Theism.

Let's start with non-religious belief. In a well-known estimate, Phil Zuckerman, a sociologist, once estimated that there were somewhere between 505-749 million atheists in the world (2006: 55). In a slightly more recent estimate, Keysar and Navarro-Rivera found 450-500 million people who said that either there was no God or they weren't sure if there was a God but didn't think there was a way to find out (2013: 553). For 2020, the *Association of Religion Data Archives* (<https://www.thearda.com/>) has a lower estimates for atheists, who deny the existence of God, gods, or the supernatural (150 million) and a higher estimate for agnostics who claim it is not possible to know if such beings exist (750 million).<sup>6</sup>

Consider next religious beliefs that are non-theistic. The Pew Research Center estimates there are around 400 million people who do adhere to a religion but a folk or traditional religion. The Pew Research Center estimates around 500 million Buddhists with the ARDA giving a similar estimate (532 million). While Buddhism has a number of distinct traditions, the majority of them do not identify a single God that is a person who also created the universe (Harvey (2019: 24, 66)). The Pew Research Center estimates 1 billion Hindus, and the ARDA has more specific data for distinct traditions (400 million Vaishnavites, 375 million Shaivites, 275 million Saktists). Like Buddhism, Hinduism is a complex religious tradition with many sub-traditions. And while many Hindus worship many Gods, they see those Gods as manifestations of a specific God (e.g., Shiva) or some ultimate reality (Flood (1996: 14)). A more salient difference is that many Hindu traditions see the world as an "emanation" of ultimate reality and not a distinct thing created *ex nihilo* as on most Abrahamic theistic traditions (Lipner 1978). Indeed, one prominent scholar of Hinduism thinks it is an "open question" whether Hindu traditions have ever contained the idea of an immanent God who is entirely distinct from the universe and creates it out of nothing (Flood (2020: 2, 8-10)). Given the complexities of the Hindu traditions, and lack of more specific data on adherents, it is probably impossible to reasonably estimate the number of theistic and non-theistic adherents. But the number of nontheists amongst the Hindu population is probably non-trivial (compare Diller (2021: section 2.1)).

Obviously, the data I've mentioned is rough and incomplete. The data is taken from a variety of sources, using different methods, across a 15-year time span. And there may be difficulties with getting data on some populations (e.g., people who say they believe in God but don't think God is a person; or a religiously unaffiliated person who believes in a non-personal higher power). But even with these drawbacks, these rough estimates indicate that at least 1 billion people—but probably no more than 2 billion—have non-theistic beliefs. That's both a significant number of people *and* a significant proportion of the world population.

Additionally, it is not simply the sheer number of people who lack theistic beliefs, but also the characteristics of the populations. First, the cognitive characteristic of the populations is significant. Beliefs in general require some degree of cognitive sophistication; and theistic

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<sup>6</sup> The Pew Research Center data is slightly messier. They report 1.1 billion with no religious affiliation globally, where that category includes atheist, agnostics, and "no particular religion" (Pew Research Center 2012a). In the US, which makes up roughly 5% of the category globally, a substantive proportion believes in God or a universal spirit (2012b: 48). It is unclear how many of that substantive proportion believe in Theism.

beliefs may require more cognitive sophistication (e.g. in terms of concepts deployed). Consequently, it would not be surprising if there were little to no theistic belief in populations that had difficulty forming the kinds of beliefs Theism requires. So it might not be surprising to find little theistic belief amongst humans at the “margins of life,” where agents begin to acquire or lose the capacities for beliefs, or amongst people whose cognitive conditions make it hard to form beliefs about other minds. But non-theistic belief is prevalent in populations that do have the cognitive capacities to form beliefs in the content of Theism. Second, the distributive characteristic of the population is significant. Non-theistic belief tends to cluster in certain groups globally. If non-theistic belief were caused by random genetic mutations—or flukes of life—then one might expect a more randomized distribution of non-theistic belief globally. But that is not what we find.

In response to this evidence, I will set aside two kinds of responses. The first response is that the innate theistic faculty is working fine; it is just that the stimulus conditions for the faculty to function are rare or unevenly distributed in the world. The second is that the innate theistic faculty is working fine; it is just that it is normally in the wrong environment so when it manifests it produces no belief or non-theistic belief. I set these aside partly because they conflict with Plantinga’s own proposals for the faculty, such as that the stimulus conditions are widely realized (Plantinga (1983: 74; 2000: 172; 2015: 33-5)). A more important reason for setting them aside is that these responses would compromise one of the primary goals of the innate theistic faculty—to produce wide-spread belief. If the innate theistic faculty had rare stimulus conditions or was normally in the wrong environment, it would fail to produce the wide-spread belief that was key for important, salvific activities.

Christian Theists have a purported explanation of non-theistic belief: Sin. A common element of Christian Theism is that human beings are in a state of “Sin” or “fallenness.” Normally, one distinguishes between specific actions or attitudes that are “sins” or “sinful” and a state of “Sin,” where the state of Sin involves at the very least a defective moral character. Reformed thinkers like John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards claim that Sin—the state—has affective or emotional effects but also noetic or intellectual effects. Following in this tradition, Plantinga argues that the cognitive effects of sin negatively influence the innate theistic faculty (see (2000: 199-216); Bergmann (2012: 522-4) makes the same suggestion). Thus, this response goes, given both the existence of an innate theistic faculty *and* the existence of Sin, it is not likely that there is widespread or near universal theistic belief because Sin is, in some way, interfering with that faculty. Others have also suggested that Sin might explain non-theistic belief (see also Talbot (1989), Wykstra, (1989: 437), Clark (1990: 150), Barrett (2009: 97-8), Peels (2011), Taber and McNabb (2018)). In what follows, I will make more precise the idea that Sin could interfere with an innate theistic faculty, and then evaluate it.<sup>7</sup>

In Plantinga’s discussion (2000: 199-216), there are three distinct models that can be teased apart for how Sin keeps the innate theistic faculty from producing theistic belief:

- *Resistance Model.* While in normal stimulus conditions, the innate theistic faculty would produce its normal output (belief), but the faculty is overpowered by resistance originating in Sin, so no output is produced.

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<sup>7</sup> Just as an innate theistic faculty can be characterized functionally, so too the effects of Sin on that faculty can also be characterized functionally. Functional characterizations are useful for spelling out metaphors. For an overview about substantive, non-functional characterizations of the state of Sin, see Timpe (2021).

- *Insensitive Muted Model*. While in normal stimulus conditions, the innate theistic faculty only periodically produces its normal output (belief) because Sin has made it less sensitive to normal stimulus conditions.
- *Weak Muted Model*. While in normal stimulus conditions, the innate theistic faculty still produces outputs (beliefs), but the force or strength of those outputs are much weaker due to Sin.

Plantinga, himself, doesn't explicitly embrace one of these models. Rather, each of these models is suggested by different metaphors and phrases Plantinga uses when he discusses Sin. The language of "resistance" (2000: 205) or "perversely turning away" (2000: 208) suggests the *Resistance Model*; and the language of "blindness" (2000: 207) suggests the *Insensitive Muted Model*; the language of "damaged" and "suppression" suggests the *Weak Muted Model* (2000: 210). Importantly, each model makes different and incompatible statements about the inner workings of the innate theistic model given Sin. Consequently, each is a different, and incompatible, way of refining the idea that Sin interferes with the innate theistic faculty. To be clear, I don't claim these are the only models one can explicate from Plantinga's writing or the only possible models for how Sin might influence an innate theistic faculty. Nonetheless, I do claim that they are reasonably precise and, for that reason, worthy of evaluation.<sup>8</sup>

In thinking through the differences between these models, an analogy may be useful. Most people have the patellar reflex: when a light force hits the front of the knee (knee patellar), their leg swings forward. Now consider three ways this reflex might fail to produce the outcome. On the first (*Resistance Model*), a person actively holds their leg back. During the normal input of hitting the front of the knee, the leg doesn't move because a stronger force—the other hand—resists the force. In the second (*Insensitive Muted Model*), the nerves have been damaged. During the normal input of hitting the front of the knee, the leg moves forward only in a fraction of cases because the nerves have become insensitive to the input. In the third (*Weak Muted Model*), the muscles and tendons are weaker. During the normal input of hitting the front of the knee, the knee swings forward but with much less force. In this case, the movement is weak and muted.

Turning to evaluation, the *Resistance Model* is implausible for explaining the character of non-theistic belief. In order for a person to rebel, resist, or turn away from something, it must be the case that the person is aware of the thing they are resisting. And it is very doubtful that the vast majority of people with non-theistic beliefs actively opposed the outputs of an innate theistic faculty. Indeed, it is likely many non-Theistic believers haven't even considered the issue of Theism at all, nonetheless, actively opposed it or intentionally turned away from it.

The *Insensitive Muted Model* also does not explain the distribution of non-theistic belief. For the stimulus conditions for the innate theistic model are supposed to be widely realized. So even if the innate theistic faculty is less liable to produce theistic outputs in stimulus conditions, it will still be the case that individuals are frequently in those stimulus conditions. Thus, one would still

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<sup>8</sup> There are other potential models one might tease out from Plantinga's work. For instance, a reviewer recommends to me what I'll call the *Blurry Outputs Model*. This model takes an analogy with disorders on which vision is "blurry" thereby interfering with the formation of visual beliefs. Analogously, perhaps Sin influences the innate theistic faculty so its outputs "blur" the proper theistic content thereby not always producing theistic beliefs. This would be an interesting model to develop. But at present I find it too imprecise. For instance, what would be "blurred" contents of theistic contents? Are those contents that are more general than theistic contents (e.g. 'something supernatural exists')? Are they contents that are inconsistent with theistic contents (e.g., 'God doesn't exist; but the world-soul does.')

Is this just a case of cognitive penetration? Without providing a fuller functional characterization of this model, it is harder to evaluate in terms of whether it could explain religious belief, theistic or non-theistic.



expect a wide distribution of theistic belief. To use an imperfect analogy, suppose an allergy medicine made one completely immune to allergic reactions 70% of the time. We would still expect people on that medicine to have allergic reactions each season because the allergens are so widespread during allergy season. Infrequent responses to stimuli are still responses.

The *Weak Muted Model* may be the best of the bunch. However, the *Weak Muted Model* does a poor job with the internal psychology of non-theistic belief. On the *Weak Muted Model*, people are frequently in situations where the innate theistic faculty produces theistic belief—it is just that those theistic beliefs are weak, short lived, or otherwise fleeting. Consequently, they go back to whatever non-theistic beliefs they had. But this is implausible as a psychological account of non-theistic belief. I am doubtful many atheists do form theistic beliefs in weak or short-lived ways. And I am even more doubtful that adherents to non-theistic religions form theistic beliefs in weak or short-lived ways before they purge them. The *Weak Muted Model* gets the internal psychology of non-theistic belief wrong.

So authors like Plantinga appeal to the effects of Sin on the innate theistic faculty in order to explain the character and distribution of non-theistic belief. However, I've considered three models for how Sin might influence an innate theistic faculty, and I've argued that none is promising for explain the character and distribution of non-theistic belief. While there are surely other possible models, at this point, I turn to a further question: *how* exactly did human beings get into this state of Sin? What are the mechanisms or events that explain how human beings got into such a state?

On a traditional understanding of Sin—dating back at least to Augustine—human beings are in a state of Sin in virtue of a historical event known as “the Fall.” On this understanding, human beings were once morally perfect but then “fell” from such a place to become Sinful. Sin became a heritable trait so that all subsequent human beings are also Sinful. However, as De Cruz and De Smedt (2013) have plausibly argued, this traditional understanding of Sin sits quite poorly with work in evolutionary theory about the origins of human beings. And while some theists may feel comfortable rejecting evolutionary theory wholesale, to many of us, such a route is a dead end. If Sin is a heritable trait, some other explanation besides “the Fall” is needed.<sup>9</sup>

But Sin might not be a heritable trait; it might be a trait that human beings acquire in some way. For instance, Bergmann (2012: 543-544) distinguishes between an “inherited sinfulness”—which fits well with the traditional understanding of a historical Fall—and a “willful sinfulness”—which involves freely acting against our own conscience. Bergmann suggests that willful sinfulness may negatively impact an innate theistic faculty in addition to whatever inherited sinfulness there is. But willful sinfulness does not seem well-placed to explain how Sin has effects on an innate theistic faculty. If willful sinfulness is the primary mechanism by which Sin effects the innate theistic faculty, then non-theistic believers would have much higher rates of going against their consciences than theistic believers. But there's no statistical evidence that is true; and anecdotal evidence strongly suggests otherwise. Worse yet, non-theistic belief is more prevalent in certain parts of the world and amongst certain ethnic groups. But it strains intellectual (and moral!) credibility to suggest those parts of the world, and those ethnic groups,

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<sup>9</sup> To his credit, Plantinga doesn't wed himself to a historical Fall (2000: 207; 2015: 49). But, to his detriment, he suggests no other explanation. This leaves him without a mechanism for explaining how Sin arises in the population. Peels, van Eyghen, and van den Brink, (2018: 211) sketch a model on which the historical fall is consistent with contemporary evolutionary theory; but they recognize there is no (non-religious) evidence for the model. For attempts to explain the state of Sin that are more sensitive to work in evolutionary theory, see Domning and Hellwig (2006), Houck (2020), and Haarsam (2021). Presumably, an evolutionary based account of Sin would not equally support each of the three models mentioned earlier.

are more likely to engage in willful sinfulness than the parts of the world with higher percentages of theistic believers. Lastly, it is not clear what specific mechanisms would connect willful sinfulness with an innate theistic faculty. Willful sinfulness is a person-level character trait involving moral defects. It is not clear how it would causally influence a sub-personal innate theistic faculty. In general, most intentional actions don't cause an unmediated change in our cognitive equipment. An appeal to willful sinfulness needs to be further developed by appeal to some kind of cognitive mechanism before it has the right structure to explain how Sin influences an innate theistic faculty.

So I've argued that the character and distribution of non-theistic belief is evidence against an innate theistic faculty. Regarding the strength of the evidence, it is plausible that this evidence is sufficiently strong to make it very unlikely that there is an innate theistic faculty. Thus, the evidence is sufficiently strong to make it *prima facie* reasonable to believe there is no innate theistic faculty. (Such *prima facie* justification might be overcome by other sources of evidence, such as work from the cognitive science of religion.) In thinking through the strength of this evidence, it is useful to consider an analogy. Consider the view that people have an innate developmental disposition to have black hair. This tendency might not manifest if, for instance, a person has a genetic condition where they don't have hair or are undergoing medical treatments inhibiting hair growth. And obviously some people might dye their naturally black hair other colors. But suppose you learned that over 1 billion people in the world *lack* black hair and don't obviously fall into those other categories. Such a huge population of human beings with non-black hair would be evidence strong enough to make it *prima facie* reasonable to reject the claim that people have an innate developmental disposition to have black hair.

So, summing up, I've argued against Christian Theism:

1. *Christian Faculty Conditional*: If Christian Theism is true, then human beings have an innate theistic faculty.
2. Given the characteristics and distribution of non-theistic belief, it is very unlikely that there is an innate theistic faculty.
3. Therefore, given the characteristics and distribution of non-theistic belief, Christian Theism is very unlikely.

I've considered an objection that uses Sin to try to undermine premise 2; I've argued that objection fails.

What's noteworthy about this argument is that it turns Plantinga's religious epistemology against Christian Theism. So Plantinga's religious epistemology faces a kind of dilemma: either retain *Christian Theism Faculty* and address a significant *de facto* challenge to Christian Theism or abandon *Christian Theism Faculty* along with the idea that *de jure* objections are not independent of *de facto* objections. Either option is problematic for Plantinga's religious epistemology and those who defend it.

### **III. Skeptical Theism, Christianity, and Theism**

My *de facto* objection to Christianity relies upon Plantinga's religious epistemology. But some authors have suggested that skeptical theism undermines key arguments for Plantinga's religious epistemology. (Fales (2003: 360-1) raises the issue, and it has been most explored by Moon (2017).) In this section, I'll argue that skeptical theism—and by extension a skeptical theistic critique—isn't obviously relevant to the argument of the previous section, but an analogous critique may be. I'll then argue that analogous critique could plausibly undermine the *Theism Faculty Conditional* but not the *Christianity Faculty Conditional*.

Skeptical theism is a family of responses to arguments from evil. Following the analysis of Perrine (2023), these responses have two parts. First, they have an (implicit or explicit) epistemic principle about evidence, reasonable belief, or the like. These epistemic principles can be applied to a wide range of subject matters. Second, they have claims in the philosophy of religion about, crudely put, our access to the kinds of reasons relevant to God's permission of evil. Skeptical theists combine these two elements to make a skeptical theistic critique of an argument. In effect, skeptical theists apply their epistemic principles to an argument from evil maintaining that the argument succeeds only if certain conditions are met. Then using their claims in the philosophy of religion, they argue that those conditions are not met. Since there are different arguments from evil, there are different skeptical theistic critiques using different claims.

The most widely discussed skeptical theistic claims are (Bergmann (2001: 279; 2009: 376):

ST1: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.

ST2: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are.

ST3: We have no good reason for thinking that the entailment relations we know of between possible goods and the permission of possible evils are representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and the permission of possible evils.

By 'representative' skeptical theists have in mind representative with regard to God's reasons for the permission of evils. By combining these claims with an epistemic principle, one can create a skeptical theistic critique of some argument from evil.

If ST1-ST3 are relevant to the argument I gave in the previous section, they would be relevant to undermining or rebutting *Christian Faculty Conditional*. But at first blush it is hard to see how ST1-ST3 are relevant to that premise. Most arguments from evil turn on the idea that God would act to *prevent* evil. But that premise turns on the idea that God would act to *promote* good. But preventing evil and promoting good are not the same. The premise is also logically consistent with ST1-ST3. And its defense didn't involve a generalization from possible goods, evils, or entailment relations to all possible goods, evils, or entailment relations relevant to God's reasons for permitting evil. The subject matters of ST1-ST3 and *Christian Faculty Conditional* are just different. And one might try to connect their subject matters—as Moon (2017: 455-8) does—but that strikes me as challenging and roundabout. It is challenging because it is not generally the case that a lack of epistemic access to one kind of reason an agent might have bleeds into a lack of epistemic access to other kinds of reasons that agent might have. It is also roundabout because I think there's an analogous critique one can raise that is more straightforward.

The analogous critique asks us to consider three possibilities about God's reasons *vis-à-vis* important activities involving theistic belief:

- Given God's projects and plans, God has an all-things-considered reason to bring it about that human beings engage in important activities that involve theistic belief.
- Given God's projects and plans, God has an all-things-considered reason to bring it about that human beings *do not* engage in important activities that involve theistic belief.
- Given God's projects and plans, God has an all-things-considered reason for allowing, but not necessarily bringing about, that human beings engage in important activities that involve theistic belief.

Notice that these three possibilities are mutually exclusive and exhaustive.

Now assuming just Theism which of these possibilities would be reasonable to believe (if any)? Many authors may just assume that the first possibility is correct. But there is no reason to discount the other two possibilities. Some may discount the second or third possibilities because, when they reflect on the matter, they can't imagine what kinds of plans God might have that would prohibit, or even just allow, such activities. But reflection alone is unlikely to give us good access to God's plans, projects, or all-things-considered reasons. So a person's inability to imagine such plans, projects, or reasons is weak evidence that they do not exist. Of course, weak evidence is not no evidence. So it may be that the first possibility is more likely than the other two. But even so, it is not reasonable for us to use reflection alone to rule out the second or third possibility—to do that would require more access to the kinds of plans, projects, and reasons God has than we have given just the assumption of Theism. In short, given Theism, and reflecting on the matter, it is not reasonable to believe any of these three possibilities. A kind of *skepticism* about God's reasons is the appropriate stance.

However, if that kind of skepticism is correct, then it is not reasonable to believe the *Theism Faculty Conditional*. For if the first possibility is likely given Theism, then it is also very likely that human beings have an innate theistic faculty. If the second possibility is likely given Theism, then it is very likely that human beings do *not* have an innate theistic faculty. And if the third possibility is likely given Theism, then it is unclear how likely it is that human beings have an innate theistic faculty. But since it is not reasonable to believe any of the three possibilities given Theism, it is not reasonable to believe that given Theism human beings have an innate theistic faculty. Thus, it is not reasonable to believe the *Theism Faculty Conditional*.<sup>10</sup>

Now assuming just Christian Theism which of these possibilities would be reasonable to believe (if any)? Given Christian Theism, the first possibility is far and away the most reasonable to believe. For it is part of Christian Theism that God intends human beings to engage in important activities that involve theistic belief. And if God intends to  $\phi$ , then presumably God has an all-things-considered reason to  $\phi$ .

It might be surprising that there is this difference between Theism and Christian Theism when it comes to these issues; but on second thought it shouldn't be. One central insight of skeptical theism is that, if we assume merely Theism and use reflection alone, it is reasonable to be skeptical of our ability to discern God's all-things-considered reasons. But if we assume a much more specific version of Theism—one that specifies at least some of God's all-things-considered reasons—and use reflection, it may be reasonable to identify God's all-things-considered reasons. For that specific version of Theism may specify some. As I construe it here, Christian Theism does specify some of God's all-things-considered reasons.

I've just sketched an argument against reasonably believing *Theism Faculty Conditional*. That argument is based upon the inability of human beings to use reflection to determine God's all-things-considered reasons concerning important activities involving theistic belief. One could call that argument a 'skeptical theistic' argument if one wanted. But it doesn't essentially rely upon any of the claims skeptical theists use in their critiques such as ST1-ST3. What's similar, if anything, is skepticism about using reflection alone to determine God's reasons, whether those reasons be applied to God's permission of evil or important activities involving theistic belief.

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<sup>10</sup> The implicit epistemic principle here is something like the total probability theorem. The three possibilities form a partition of Theism; each cell has different implications regarding an innate theistic faculty; and no cell is more probable than not.

However, I'm not particularly interested in defending that sketched argument here. I'm more interested in pointing out that an analogous argument against *Christian Faculty Conditional* is far less plausible. But my argument in the previous section used the *Christian Faculty Conditional* and not the *Theism Faculty Conditional*. So even if human beings are unable to use reflection to determine God's all-things-considered reasons concerning important activities involving theistic belief, such inability wouldn't undermine the *Christian Faculty Conditional* and by extension my argument in the previous section.

#### IV. Maitzen's Argument

The closest precursor to my argument is one given by Stephen Maitzen (2006, 2008).<sup>11</sup> Maitzen claims that the "demographics of theism... confound theistic explanation of non-belief in God" and that "God's existence is disconfirmed by the fact that not everyone believes in God" (2006: 177). Maitzen's argument is best understood as a probabilistic argument using Bayes' theorem. Let 'T' designate Theism and let 'D' designate a proposition containing what Maitzen calls the "demographics of theism," including propositions about the proportions of non-theistic belief in the world, and how they are distributed in the world in a "lopsided" way (2006: 179-80). The reconstruction of Maitzen's argument has one premise:

- $\Pr(D|T) < \Pr(D|\sim T)$

The conclusion, drawn from a well-understood application of Bayes' theorem, is:

- $\Pr(T|D) < \Pr(T)$

In other words, a proposition about the demographics of theism disconfirms Theism, reducing its probability from what it was prior to considering that proposition.<sup>12</sup>

Both my argument and Maitzen's appeal to facts about the characteristics and distribution of non-theistic belief. However, there are several key differences. First, Maitzen's argument is a Bayesian one that compares two hypotheses with regard to some data. But while Maitzen argues that Theism cannot explain that data, he spends virtually no time evaluating atheistic explanations of that data. Thus, Maitzen's argument is radically incomplete. By contrast, my argument is that a certain body of data strongly disconfirms a prediction of Christian Theism. My argument is not a comparative one that should be modeled using Bayes' Theorem. Consequently, my argument is not incomplete in virtue of neglecting atheistic explanations of non-theistic belief. Second, while Maitzen thinks that the character and distribution of non-theistic belief is evidence against Theism, he doesn't explain or defend the strength of that evidence. (His argument would still be sound if the probability of Theism merely drops by .0000000001.) By contrast, I've argued that the evidence I've adduced is strong enough to make it *prima facie* reasonable to not believe Christian Theism. Lastly, I'll note that some authors have tried to respond to Maitzen's argument by claiming that specific versions of Theism—specific ways of developing it—do explain the character and distribution of non-theistic belief (see, e.g., Marsh (2008), Baker-Hytch (2016)). These authors try to show that  $\Pr(D|T)$  is high or, at least, comparable to  $\Pr(D|\sim T)$ . I'll just note that these responses are in deep tension with the *Christianity Faculty Conditional*. So if successful they will likely undermine the claim that there cannot be cogent *de jure* objections to Christian Theism without cogent *de facto* objections to

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<sup>11</sup> Maitzen's argument is, itself, a deviation from Schellenberg's celebrated "hiddenness" argument. I don't have the space to compare my argument to Schellenberg's, though I hope to in future work. But Schellenberg's argument and mine have different dialectical strengths and weaknesses in the same way that J. L. Mackie and William Rowe's arguments from evil have different dialectical strengths and weaknesses. It's probably best for both to be around.

<sup>12</sup> It is actually unclear if Maitzen takes his argument to be against (mere) Theism or a specific form of Christianity; see (2006: 177-179) for evidence of both interpretations.

Christian Theism. So those responses to Maitzen's argument don't evade the dilemma I've indicated for Plantinga's religious epistemology.

#### V. Concluding Comments

I've argued against Christian Theism, relying upon the *Christian Faculty Conditional* and Plantinga's defense of it in terms of an innate theistic faculty. I've further clarified three models of how sin might interfere with an innate theistic faculty, arguing that none of the three models would help explain the distribution and characteristics of non-theistic belief. However, it is an open question whether my arguments would apply equally well to other views. For instance, I have not considered all possible views about how Sin might influence an innate theistic faculty. Nor have I considered alternative views of theistic faculties, such as ones where they lack widely realized stimulus conditions or essentially require social input from a community. My hope is that others, in responding to my arguments here, will provide specific functionally described models of Sin and theistic belief.<sup>13</sup>

#### Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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