

A supreme being...
Is the belief rational?...
Even God wonders!

Is Belief in God Rational?

Thank you, Susan, for your kind introduction, and for your long-time service leadership. Thank you, Joan, for your lovely music. I will miss you. Come back soon to visit! And, thank you to the Fellowship for the opportunity to speak today. It is always an honor and a privilege.

So,...a Catholic priest, a Pentecostal preacher and a Jewish rabbi meet at Al Johnson's for breakfast every Monday morning to "talk shop." One Monday the priest makes an argument that preaching to people isn't all that hard. The real challenge would be to preach to and convert a bear! One thing led to another, and they decided to do an experiment. They would each go their own way, find a bear, preach to it, and attempt to convert it. The next Monday they would reconvene at Al Johnson's to relate their experiences. The seven days were up, and they got back together,...but this time at the Door County Medical Center! Father Flannery, the Catholic priest, had his arm in a sling, was on crutches, and had a number of bandages. "Well," he said, "I went into the Ephraim Swamp to find a bear. And when I found him I began to read to him from the Catechism. That bear wanted nothing to do with it and slapped me around pretty good. So, I grabbed my holy water, sprinkled him, and Mary Mother of God, he was converted

and became as gentle as a lamb! The bishop is coming next week to give him first communion and confirmation."

Reverend Billy Bob, the Pentecostal preacher, spoke next. He was in a wheelchair, with an arm and a leg in a cast. In his best fire and brimstone oratory he exclaimed, "WELL my brothers, you KNOW that Pentecostals don't just sprinkle! I went into Peninsula Park and FOUND me a bear. And then I began to read from God's HOLY WORD...and that bear wanted nothing to do with me. So, I took HOLD of him and we began to wrestle. We wrestled all the way down to Nicolet Bay. And then I did a full IMMERSION, BAPTIZING his hairy soul! Just like that, he became as gentle as a lamb. We spent the rest of the day praying and praising the Lord."

Father Flannery and Reverend Billy Bob looked down at their friend the rabbi, who was in a hospital bed in a full body cast and in traction. "Well," the rabbi said, in a weak voice, "looking back on it now,...I probably should have led with something other than circumcision!"

This joke goes to the heart of what I want to talk about today...not whether practicing religious rituals is a prerequisite for salvation!...But whether religious belief in general, and belief in God in particular, is rational...*Spoiler alert!...It depends!* I know, I know,...as Unitarians you are very disappointed with that answer...because I know how much you *love* certainty! That said, let me get to the details, and see if you might look at things differently by the end of the message!

First, some background and philosophical history. Talk about rational belief in God usually begins with the question of whether God exists. Why?...Because, if it could be proven that God exists, then of course it would be rational to believe it! But no convincing “proofs” for God’s existence have been forthcoming in Western philosophy. Debate about the problem reached the point where philosophers argued that it can even be “proven that we cannot prove that God exists!” (E.g., Bertrand Russell.) Others argued that the problem was not even worth talking about because talk about “God” is meaningless. (E.g., The Logical Positivists.) “TIME” magazine even ran a cover in the late 1960s proclaiming that “God is Dead!” Despite these claims, the problem of whether *belief in God is rational* is important...because the problem is not one of just proving God’s existence or demonstrating that the concept of God is meaningful. The problem of rational belief in God is broader and deeper. It involves the question of whether God is *possible*, i.e., it raises the question of whether the concept of God is consistent, which was the question Leibniz asked back in the 17th century, leading to the development of what is known as *theodicy*. It involves the question of whether God is within the realm of *human understanding*, i.e., whether human concepts apply to God, which was Kant’s concern, in the 18th century, leading to the important view that there are things that are beyond human comprehension. And it involves the question of whether there is *justification* for belief in God, even if we cannot prove that God exists, which has been the life-long focus of the Christian apologist Alvin Plantinga in the 20th and 21st centuries.

The questions of the *possibility of God; whether human understanding of God is possible; and whether there is any possible justification for belief in God* go to the heart of the question of the rationality of belief in God. And we shall now go there as well...concentrating on the issue of justification.

Contrary to local legend, God is not from Door County! However, last Sunday I found evidence that he may be visiting in Ephraim! Here is a license plate I saw there! (GODS CTY) While we really don't know where God is from, we do know that he came into existence (philosophical existence, that is!) through three famous arguments. As indicated, the idea was that if one could get a proof that God existed, one would have grounds for rational belief in God. The three arguments are well known to all. (So, please excuse the brief review!) First, the *cosmological argument* (the "before the fact," *first cause* argument),...Aristotle was the earliest proponent, in the 4th century B.C.E., arguing for an "Unmoved Mover," i.e., something responsible for motion in the universe. Second, the *teleological argument* (the "after the fact," *argument from design*),...Cicero being the principal proponent, in the 2nd century of the C.E., arguing that the universe appears to be designed, so something had to be responsible for the design. And third, my favorite,...the *ontological argument* (the "because of the fact," *argument from the definition of God*),...St. Anselm being the originator in the 11th century...arguing: "How could the being than whom no greater can be conceived *not* exist? Because, if it didn't, it would then be possible to conceive of a greater being...namely one just like it, but which

did exist!...This was, and still is *very* heady stuff coming from the monk who was soon to become the Archbishop of Canterbury!

These three arguments *for* God's existence (and their many variants over many centuries) have all failed...for one reason or another. (Explaining why will be the topic of my message next Sunday!) At the same time, all of the arguments *against* the existence of God have failed as well. The most famous of these being the *Argument from Evil* ("If God is Omnibenevolent, i.e., all good, why then is there evil in the world?," which was essentially Job's question, in the "Old Testament," 4,000 years ago,...long before any of the arguments "for God" just noted); and *the Free Will/Determinism Argument*, ("If God is Omniscient, i.e., all knowing, then God knows what I am going to do next, so how then can I be free?")...And, as Kant significantly added, how then can I be held morally responsible for my actions? (I shall explain why that is so next Sunday as well!)

Long and short of it, philosophers have rehashed and redeveloped the pro and con arguments for the existence of God for centuries. God's existence is, by all accounts, the most discussed problem in Western philosophy, with more books and journal articles written about it than any other problem! But, progress has not been forthcoming. This suggests that the question needs to be recast. Despite the failure to either prove or disprove whether God exists, *might it still be rational to believe it?* If so, why? and, if not, why not? We shall now explore these questions...

Alvin Plantinga (one of my graduate school professors) argued in the 1960s, in his famous book “God and Other Minds,” (here is a signed copy...one of few...both signed ...and copies!)...he argued that belief in God is like belief in *other minds*. Plantinga’s argument was that if we believe in *other minds*, which we all do, i.e., if we believe that those other than us are sentient beings, even if we cannot prove it, (and, in fact, as Plantinga convincingly showed we cannot prove it!)...then the *kinds* of reasons we have for belief in other minds are of a piece with the *kinds* of reasons for belief in God. Therefore, we should also believe in God. Plantinga’s analogical argument was an important contribution to the discussion of rational belief in God,...but one not without problems. It opened the door for rational belief in anything! In short, the argument proved too much...just as Gaunilo’s argument against Anselm’s original Ontological Argument, way back in 1077, showed that Anselm’s argument proved too much. Let me explain...because the point is important. Gaunilo argued that if Anselm had a proof that the perfect being existed, i.e., the being than whom no greater can be conceived, then he also had a proof that *anything* than which no greater can be conceived must also exist! Gaunilo’s example was “the perfect island.” (No, it wasn’t Washington Island!) It is interesting to note that Leibniz picked up on this perfection idea six hundred years later, arguing that everything perfect *must* exist if God exists, and thus “this must be the best of all possible worlds!” The idea that this is “best of all possible worlds” was, of course,

what Voltaire parodied, mocking Leibniz, in his famous novellas “Candide” and “Zadig.”

But, back to Plantinga’s argument.

As indicated, the problem with arguing from belief in other minds to belief in God, and thus to the rationality of believing the latter, is that we can then argue for the rationality of believing in anything using the same analogical argument. *Santa Claus comes immediately to mind!* While Plantinga denies that his argument lets Santa Claus into the manger...(his reasons why are too complex to go into here)..., he did recognize that he needed something stronger than the *other minds* analogical argument to justify rational belief in God. Plantinga delivered on that in his subsequent work, “Warranted Christian Belief,” where he made a different case for rational belief in God. And he did so not by arguing that God exists, but by arguing that *if* God exists (which would then mean that it was true), there would have to be *warrant* for the belief, i.e., something that made the belief true. Clever! But what warrant?

Enter the Christian apologist! Plantinga argued that warrant for belief in God comes from *sensus divinitatis*,...our sense of the divine. The concept had its roots in the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas, but the term was coined by John Calvin. (I note that Plantinga is a life-long Calvinist! He, his father and two of his brothers all taught philosophy or theology at Calvin College!) What is the basis of *sensus divinitatis*? Calvin identified it as an ability to discover God that precedes reason, through a sense implanted in us, not by God, but by nature. Plantinga describes it as “a natural human tendency, a

disposition.” The idea of God is not innate, rather the sense of the divine is like memory and perception. It serves to form and mold our beliefs. Our utilization of the capacity makes us think about God, just like our utilization of perception and memory make us think about the world. And when we do, we find truth...O.K., enough exegesis of *sensus divinitatis*...before I convert all of you to Calvinism!

While an important effort on Plantinga’s part (because of the novel approach of arguing that we don’t need a proof of God’s existence, just a basis for the belief...*if it were true*...in order to demonstrate its rationality)...nonetheless, the argument has problems. What if I have *sensus divinitatis* of a different divine being, say Allah or Buddha? Or is that not possible? If not, why not? Or, what if I have *sensus* of a being that turns out to be mythical? That seems quite possible (*Santa Claus again comes to mind*), but surely that would not be warrant for it being rational to believe it. A more telling criticism, however, is that Plantinga’s argument is circular. If my belief in God is warranted because of the sense of the divine implanted in me by nature, then the theory that says “the implanted sense of the divine delivers knowledge” is a theory that itself requires warrant! In short, Plantinga takes as his model for warranted belief justifying the basis of the belief. But that methodology itself then requires justification!

Moreover, there is a “damning” corollary of the *sensus divinitatis* theory...just in case you were still thinking about converting to Calvinism! What about people who don’t have *sensus divinitatis*? Or perhaps better, what about those of us whose sense of the

divine is not actualized? Plantinga argues, as did Calvin, that “failure” of *sensus divinitatis* in any individual is *because you have sinned!* Plantinga calls it the “noetic effect of sin,” sin having “muddled your thoughts about God!” This is clearly self-serving on the part of both Calvin and Plantinga and close to a conspiracy theory,...particularly given Calvinist views about original sin and depravity...But, it does at least explain why there are Unitarians!... It is time to move on...

We need a new approach to the problem of rational belief. We need to move away from trying to *justify* beliefs in order to demonstrate their rationality. We need a non-justificationist approach to the problem. What would it mean to say that a belief is rational from such a perspective? Well, it depends upon what the meaning of “rational” *is*...to quote a famous line from Bill Clinton! We need a theory of rational belief that gets us beyond the idea that warrant and justification are necessary conditions of rationality. We need a theory that looks in the opposite direction. I am not the first to conceive of such an idea. But, as William James once said, “the next best thing to a new idea is a good old one!” Here then is a non-justificationist theory of rational belief. (I talked about it at the UU nine years ago, as I’m sure you all recall! So, if you do, you can just nod off at this point...and, if you don’t recall, well, you can do the same!)

A belief is rational if it meets three conditions:

1. **The “In principle” condition:** The belief *can be held open to criticism*. That is, it is a belief that can be *tested*...at least in principle. (Not verified or justified, but

tested.) There are many beliefs that do not meet this standard. For example, the belief that “The universe, and everything in it, doubles in size overnight...and its volumes quadruple, unbeknownst to us” is an example of an untestable belief...because any test involving it will be such that the tools of measurement will themselves have doubled or quadrupled in size overnight! Or the belief that “The universe came into existence two minutes ago, with everything in place, as it is...with all of the fossils, all of our beliefs, all of our memories, everybody here now at the UU, etc., etc.!” is another such belief. Neither it nor the “doubling hypothesis” are open to criticism. *They cannot be held open to criticism because they cannot be tested.* There is no way to show that they are mistaken...even though we believe that they obviously are. (This is, by the way, the problem with all conspiracy theories. They are made untestable...on purpose.) Because the two beliefs identified above cannot be tested, they are not worthy of further consideration. Discussion of them will get us nowhere...*even if they were true.* (This is an interesting problem that we can pursue in the “talkback” because the theory of rational belief being proposed entails that even things that are true may not be rational to believe!)

2. **The “In practice” condition:** The belief not only can be held open to criticism but ***is held open to criticism*** by its proponents. This condition represents what I call the “institutional” standard of rational belief. If you cannot give up belief in

something, if without belief in it you cannot be what you claim to be, then your belief is not rationally held...whether it is true or not. This is the problem with all authoritarian theories, particularly those of traditional religion and the fundamental beliefs at their core. Within traditional Christian religions you cannot give up the belief that Christ is God and still be a Christian...*because that is what it means to be a Christian!* Thus, given the theory of rational belief being proposed, the fundamental belief of traditional Christianity...i.e., the belief that Christ is God,...is an irrational belief! This is not blasphemy! The belief is irrational *not* because it is false...*it might even be true!* It is irrational *because of the way the belief is held*. It is not and cannot be challenged by those who believe it. The belief is non-negotiable. Its denial is off the table. This is why so many arguments about religious belief get us nowhere. One of the keys to understanding the theory of rational belief being proposed is that *it is not truth that is important for rational belief, but open mindedness*.

3. **The “In theory” condition:** The belief must have withstood all reasonable criticism. This condition means that up until now all philosophical, scientific and logical criticism of the belief have been met. As Nietzsche said, “the truth is what is held to be irrefutable but has not yet been refuted!” The point is, withstanding criticism...even if the belief in question is mistaken...is a reasonable standard...until the belief in question is refuted. Thus, even if a

belief is false, if it is testable, held open to criticism by its proponents, and has withstood all reasonable criticism, it is rational to believe it. *So, it can be rational to believe things that are false,...and it can be irrational to believe things that are true.* (Hey, I said the problem was broad and deep!)

The theory of rational belief just proposed is known as Critical Rationalism. It has its roots in ancient Greek philosophy, in the Socratic Dialectic. It also had proponents among 19th century American Pragmatists, Charles Sanders Peirce and John Dewey in particular. Its modern and most developed version is attributable to the 20th century philosopher Karl Popper, and his student, W.W. Bartley III. *It is a very powerful theory. Unlike other theories of rational belief, it meets its own standards. It can be and is held open to criticism by its proponents, and it has met all serious challenges to date.* In fact, *to criticize it is to practice it! To be rational is to be critical.* It is to hold *all* of your beliefs open to criticism...*all* the time. It is to meet those challenges through rational counterargument. Of course, in order to fully develop the theory, we need standards for and acceptance of what counts as reasonable criticism. Developing those standards, and getting that consent, will of course require a few more UU Sundays!

An important point, already noted, is that the theory of Critical Rationalism allows beliefs that are false to be held rationally. *But that is just the point.* Because any theory might be false,...including the theory that any theory might be false,...which would, of

course, then make some theory true,...we must hold all of our beliefs open to criticism... Even our “observation” statements and our “crucial” tests must be held open to criticism. We must welcome criticism and redevelop our theories to meet the challenges of that criticism. We must do so not by insulating our theories to eliminate or explain away anomalous cases, but by improving our theories in ways that take us beyond where we are today, improving our explanations and, thus, making progress. Only this will get us closer to the truth. Getting new and better criticisms; new and better theories; and new and better problems are at the heart of what it means to be rational...

Let me quote from my late dear friend Rik Warch, former Lawrence University president, to illustrate the point. In his 1993 matriculation address, Rik argued:

“My belief, say, that the world was created in six days may be a deeply felt conviction, but to the extent that I do not admit the possibility of its error, then I cannot bring that idea into play in terms of...inquiry. Further,...science has convincingly demonstrated that that idea, as knowledge, doesn’t count;...Consequently, it has no place in the public debate about ideas regarding the origins of the universe or of species on two grounds: first, I refuse to acknowledge that it might be wrong; and second, it has failed to meet the test of withstanding attempts to debunk it.”

So, to conclude, why is the theory of Critical Rationalism progress on the problem of whether belief in God is rational, the problem with which today’s message began? First, it moves us away from “justification” as the path to a solution...because justification has failed as a method to demonstrate that belief in God is rational. Second, it allows that belief in God can be rational *even if the belief is false*...if those who believe it remain open to and can meet rational criticism of it. I think this resets the table for the next “Last

Super,” possibly even allowing Unitarians a seat! By adopting a critical approach, we can go forward...on common ground. We can act on our beliefs, rationally, until such time that they are shown to be mistaken. And, if and when they are, we can then change course, making progress toward the truth.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak today. I hope you found the message informative. I look forward to the talkback...where I will explain why belief in Santa Claus is rational!