

Does the Rational Justification of Belief in God require Natural Theology?

Abbas Yazdani*

Abstract

Does belief in God require the arguments of natural theology to be rationally justified? Some Reformed epistemologists hold that the arguments of natural theology are not necessary for belief in God to be warrant. Moreover, in responding to the question of whether the arguments of natural theology can confirm or strengthen theistic beliefs, they maintain that since none of the traditional theistic arguments is true, they cannot confirm or strengthen theistic beliefs. However, in this paper, I will argue that although belief in God is properly basic, this belief - at least, in some circumstances - is still in need of the evidence and arguments of natural theology. Hence, natural theology still is inescapable in some contexts. I shall argue that in spite of what has been contended, Reformed thinkers endorse a kind of natural theology. I shall also argue that it is not true to say that all theistic arguments are flawed and useless; as we shall see, some arguments could be sufficient evidence for theistic beliefs. Accordingly, there is no conflict between basicity of belief in God and inferential arguments of natural theology.

Keywords: *God, Natural theology, Reformed Epistemology, Sufficient Evidence, Basicity.*

*. Assistant Professor in Phil. of Religion . The University of Zanjan

E-mail: a.yazdani97@yahoo.com

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1. Introduction

Natural theology has been defined in different senses. In a broad sense, it has been defined as human attempts on the basis of natural reason and human epistemic faculties to think about the existence and the nature of God, without referring to revelation. Natural theology in this sense includes intuitive, conscious, experiential, and mystical ways to belief in God. I call this version of natural theology *moderate* one. In a *restricted* sense, natural theology is ascribed to the demonstrative procedure and the syllogistic inference from other propositions in order to prove God's existence. Thus, firstly, all natural theology does not seek to prove, rather it may merely indicate to, admonish, or interpret the theological beliefs. Secondly, natural theology is not restricted to reason; rather it may be what is commonly accepted in society, what is felt, or what we naturally know, or what is culturally inherited and the like. Thirdly, natural theology is not just restricted to the existence of God; it may concern with God's attributes, the universe, future life and so on.

Theist evidentialists claimed that there are some reasons and motivations to employ natural theology. Natural theology is the project of (a) proposing proofs or arguments for the existence of God and in general for theism, (b) proposing proofs or arguments for both theists themselves and someone else to join theists in their beliefs, and (c) defending religious beliefs against objections and alleged contradictions in religious beliefs by way of considering evidence or arguments.

2. 1. The Reformed Thinkers and Natural Theology

Some Reformed thinkers attempted to reject natural theology for rationality of belief in God by making use of the reformed tradition. Plantinga, for instance, remarked that from Calvin's point of view, one who does not believe in God is in an epistemically substandard position. Calvin held that believers in God do not need natural theology, either as the source of confidence or as a kind of justification, because the belief based on proofs and arguments is likely to be unstable and wavering. Plantinga explains the issue in this way. Consider someone whose belief in God is based on arguments, if somebody presented some strong objection to his belief what should he do? Should he discontinue his belief in God? Furthermore, he always has to keep checking the philosophical works and issues to see whether anybody has objected to his beliefs or not. This would not be possible for everyone, because some of the believers are not able to deal with philosophical issues. In addition, following this approach to

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belief in God makes problem for believers, because it is too time-consuming.

Plantinga remarks that considering existence of God, for instance, according to natural theology, what one ought to believe depends on the result of the inquiry; if there are good arguments, one ought to accept God's existence; if there are good arguments against God's existence, one ought to accept its denial; and if the arguments on both sides are equally strong, one ought to accept agnosticism. Therefore, with respect to natural theology, in order to prove or demonstrate God's existence one has to have a deductive argument premises of which are derived from the deliverances of reason.

In "The reformed objection to natural theology", Plantinga quotes from the nineteenth century Dutch theologian, Hermann Bavinck against natural theology:

Scriptures urges us to behold heaven and earth, birds and flowers and lilies, in order that we may see and recognize God in them. "Lift up your eyes on high, and see who has created these." Is. 40:26. Scripture does not reason in the abstract. It does not make God the conclusion of a syllogism, leaving it to us whether we think the argument holds or not. (Bavinck, 1951, p. 76)

In fact, Bavinck holds that we need no arguments or demonstration to accept the existence of God. He makes an analogy between the existence of self, of the world, and the like on the one hand and the existence of God on the other hand. He holds that belief in God resembles belief in the existence of the self or of the external world. However, he does not ignore the role of testimony in establishing faith in us.

Of the existence of self, of the world round about us, of logical and moral laws, etc., we are so deeply convinced because of the indelible impressions which all these things make upon our consciousness that we need no arguments or demonstration. . . . The so-called proofs are by no means the final grounds of our most certain conviction that God exists: This certainty is established only by faith; i.e., by the spontaneous testimony which forces itself upon from every side. (ibid, p.78)

Plantinga holds that from Bavinck's point of view, first, belief in God is not based upon arguments or proofs, and second, the believer needs no arguments or demonstration for belief in God to be rationally justified.

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Therefore, the believer does not need natural theology to achieve rationality in his belief in God.

2. 2. Plantinga's rejection of natural theology

As we know, propositions have various degrees of warrant; self-evident propositions have maximal degree of warrant or justification. Plantinga holds that it is doubtful that any of the arguments of natural theology contain that maximal degree of warrant or justification. Even he contends that "None of them, so far as I can see, measures up to the enormously high standards to which they would have to conform if they were to show that the existence of God has this maximal epistemic status." (Plantinga, 1991, p. 289)

Plantinga maintains that the arguments of natural theology are not needed for belief in God to have warrant. He remarks that from Calvin's point of view, human cognitive faculties produce belief in God, and since natural faculties on the basis of a design plan aim at truth, belief in God is produced in the basic way. So it does not need natural theology to have warrant.

In responding to the question of whether the arguments of natural theology can confirm or strengthen belief in God, and whether they can increase the degree of warrant of belief in God, Plantinga holds that natural theology might increase the degree of warrant if there were any good theistic arguments. However, Plantinga holds that there are no good arguments of natural theology for belief in God.

None of the traditional theistic arguments, I think, measure up to the standards traditionally applied to them. None starts from premises that are self-evident (or even accepted by every reasonable person who considers them) and proceeds inexorably by self-evident argument forms to the conclusion that theism is true; none of them meets the exalted standards traditionally applied to them. But then no other philosophical arguments for interesting conclusions meet those standards either. (ibid, p. 312)

It seems that Plantinga's account of the failure of the traditional theistic arguments is a mere allegation, because he probably has not examined all such arguments in all traditions. Therefore, he cannot conclude that none of them is sound. He contends that none of the traditional theistic arguments starts from premises that are self-evident, but I will show that, at least, the "truthful argument" starts from premises that are self-evident. So, it proceeds by self-evident argument to the conclusion that theism is true.

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In "The reformed objection to natural theology" and "Reason and belief in God", Plantinga says that one element in the Reformed objection to natural theology is the view that "belief in God *ought not* to be based on arguments."¹ Again, as we have seen, with reference to Calvin and Bavinck, Plantinga says: "The correct or proper way to believe in God, they thought, was not on the basis of arguments from natural theology or anywhere else; the correct way was to take belief in God as basic." (Plantinga, 1983, p. 72)² Now the question is 'what is the problem with a person who holds his theistic belief on the basis of theistic arguments or inference?' Plantinga's project implies that there is something incorrect, improper, or defective in holding theistic belief on the basis of theistic arguments or as a matter of inference. Accordingly, we could say that if the person's relevant cognitive faculties were functioning properly, then she would hold theistic belief in a basic way. The argument, then, would be that a person who accepted theistic belief in an inferential manner is subject to some sort of cognitive disorder or malfunction.

We should note that "the proper function" theory concerning the criterion of warrant is not adequate in some contexts. It cannot help the believer to convince the unbeliever or the doubter, or to convince himself. But by natural theology, a doubter's doubt may disappear and he comes to believe in God. Moreover, the basicity of belief in God would not prevent a theist from being able to give reasons to others why they should believe in God; as Plantinga himself contends that a belief might be basic for one person and not for another.

3. 1. A Defence of Moderate Natural Theology

Now, I shall argue that in spite of the attempts of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy of religion, particularly Plantinga's reformed epistemology, against natural theology, it seems that the Reformed tradition has *endorses* a kind of natural theology, namely, moderate natural theology. For, firstly, the Reformed tradition has affirmed a sort of natural knowledge of God apart from revelation. Secondly, the tradition has believed that theistic arguments are permissible, if not necessary. That is to say, Plantinga contends that inferential arguments of natural theology are unnecessary, because we have natural knowledge of God by a direct acquaintance of the mind. Plantinga's version of this Calvinist tradition is the doctrine of properly basic belief. But from this direct acquaintance with God it does not, necessarily, follow that natural theology is unnecessary. It may be the case that human natural reason can infer God's existence in various ways, that is, through cosmological or ontological or moral arguments. Therefore,

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having a properly basic belief does not require that we need no inference. In other words, the immediacy of our knowledge of God does not require that we do not need to know Him also by inferential arguments. Consequently, we cannot conclude the rejection of natural theology from the Reformed tradition.

There is no reason for the believer to limit his knowledge of God to the direct awareness of Him. Therefore, the Reformed tradition does not entail the impossibility of natural theology, but as we have seen earlier, this tradition show us that there is no need for us to base our faith upon inferential arguments of natural theology. In other words, none of these arguments is required as the basis for religious faith. It could be said that once one come to believe in God through a natural awareness of Him, he may benefit from the arguments of natural theology to defend theistic beliefs against doubts and objections. In this case, if the believer fails to pursue natural theology it does not follow that he or she fails to do this as a consequence of faith. Thus, if the arguments of natural theology are not necessary for the epistemic justification of faith, they are necessary and appropriate both for believer and for the unbelieving objector. Moreover, they may confirm or strengthen the believers' beliefs.

3. 2. Reformed thinkers' endorsement of Natural Theology

As it has been pointed out earlier, In *Institutes of the Christian religion*, Calvin claims "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" (Calvin, 1960, 1.3.1.). Likewise, he talks about the external witness or manifestation of God in creation. God "not only sowed in men's minds that seed of religion of which we have spoken but revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him" (ibid, 1.5.1.).

It seems that the mentioned passage indicates an endorsement of theistic arguments. For Calvin contends that the manifestation of God in the created order indicates the existence of God. This, in fact, is a kind of natural argument for God's existence. However, Calvin holds that syllogistic proofs and demonstrative arguments are not needed.

In responding to the question how we know there is a God, Willison remarks that God's existence is evident "not only from the Bible, but also from the light of nature" and "the works of creation" (Willison, *An explanation of the assembly's shorter catechism*, p. 21.)

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Willison then lists a variety of evidences for the existence and attributes of God, including “the beautiful order and motion of the luminaries of heaven . . . the wonderful frame of man’s body and soul, the miracles which have been wrought, the prophecies which have been fulfilled, the consent of all nations to this truth” (Ibid., p. 21).

Hodge (1797-1878) as a representative of the reformed tradition places a special emphasis on the argument from design which he states inferentially as “Design supposes a designer. The world everywhere exhibits marks of design. Therefore, the world owes its existence to an intelligent author” (Hodge, 1982, vol. 1, pp. 215-216). Unlike the version of the argument traditionally associated with Paley, Hodge’s argument is not an argument from analogy. He defines design in such a way that it analytically entails existence of a designer, so that his premise will constitute a self-evident truth. He then constructs an argument from “evidence of design” in the world. Hodge holds that the strength of theistic arguments depends on how we suggest them:

Most of the objections to the conclusiveness of the arguments in question arise from a misapprehension of what they are intended to prove. It is often assumed that each argument must prove the whole doctrine of Theism; whereas one argument may prove one element of that doctrine; and other arguments different elements. The cosmological argument may prove the existence of a necessary and eternal being, the teleological argument, that that being is intelligent, the moral argument that He is a person possessing moral attributes (Ibid., p. 203).

We can conclude that the Reformed tradition has *not* on the whole rejected natural theology. Some Reformed theologians have argued against strong natural theology, but if they have been successful in this criticism they would undermine only syllogistic and demonstrative arguments.

3. 3. Tillich’s ontological approach as a moderate natural theology

As we have seen, some Reformed epistemologists contends that since none of the theistic arguments is sound and since none of them begins with premises which are self-evident, they cannot confirm or strengthen theistic beliefs. Now I will show that there are some theistic arguments that begins with premises which are self-evident, and can confirm or strengthen theistic beliefs. One of them is Tillich’s ontological argument. Tillich’s departure point for the ontological approach is the self and the religious

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consciousness. He says:

The Franciscan school of the 13th century ... developed the Augustinian solution into a doctrine of the principles of theology ... Their whole emphasis was on the immediacy of the knowledge of God. According to Bonaventura, "God is most truly present to the very soul and immediate knowledge; he is knowable in himself and without media ... (Tillich, 1946, P.4)

In respect to the origin of the idea of God, Tillich refers to what he calls 'two Absolutes' by which he means the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the philosophical conception of Being. He holds that the conception of God is not taken from the experience of the world, rather it is taken from the religious consciousness and it is identical to Being itself. In *The Present status of natural theology*, Smith says:

The ontological way is the way of immediacy where apprehension, understanding, and acceptance are all one, and certainly comes, as Tillich says, 'out of the things themselves without a medium.' This is intuitive rationalism operating, as in the Platonic dialectic, to bring the mind to a recognition of what was there all along but is only noticed upon reflection. For this approach God as the Unconditional or veritas is the basic certainty and, as such, not a matter of faith ... In this doctrine, Tillich speaks not of the ontological argument but of the ontological way or approach (Smith, 1958, pp. 932-933).

4. 1. The hypothesis of theism and probabilistic arguments

Some theologians maintain that if the theistic arguments cannot prove logically theistic beliefs, nonetheless, they are useful. Berkhof, for example, says: "While they [theistic arguments] do not prove the existence of God beyond the possibility of doubt, so as to compel assent, they can be so construed as to establish a strong probability and thereby silence many unbelievers." (Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 29)

Likewise, Oosterzee holds that theistic arguments could be employed in defence of faith against doubts and objections. In *Christian dogmatics*, he says "the proofs we speak of—properly conducted and suitably combined—are powerful enough to offer a scientific defence for faith in God, to overcome honest doubts, and to brand as inexcusable sin, as well as deplorable folly, the obdurate unbelief which—in the presence of so much light—retains its

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own darkness.”³

Swinburne offers his probabilistic argument as a new way of arguing for the existence of God. He holds that the hypothesis of theism is more probable with respect to various phenomena in the universe. In *The existence of God*, under the title “The Balance of Probability”, Swinburne remarked:

various occurrent phenomena are such that they are more to be expected, more probable if there is a God than if there is not. The existence of the universe, its conformity to order, the existence of animals and men, men having great opportunities for co-operation in acquiring knowledge and moulding the universe, the pattern of history and the existence of some evidence of miracles, and finally the occurrence of religious experiences, are all such as we have reason to expect if there is a God, and less reason to expect otherwise (Swinburne, 1979, p. 277).

Swinburne contends that the universe requires an explanation and that the existence of the universe is best explained by the hypothesis of theism. However, some philosophers have rejected Swinburne’s probabilistic argument. Mackie, for instance, disagrees with Swinburne and holds that the world is not unlikely without the hypothesis of theism and that the naturalistic hypotheses can adequately explain the phenomena in question. He believes that God’s existence is quite unlikely and that theism is implausible. Mackie concludes, “The balance of probabilities, therefore, comes out strongly against the existence of God.” (Mackie, 1982, p. 253)

It seems that the issue depends on which hypothesis one is rationally has to accept. Even though the theistic hypothesis has a higher grade of probability, one might not be rationally inclined to accept it because one might believe that it is not an initially plausible hypothesis. The crucial question is "are there any objective means for determining rational initial plausibility of judgements?" It seems that an initially theistic hypothesis is more plausible, because as it has been mentioned earlier, human beings have a natural immediate knowledge of God. We have a God-belief-generator module function of which is truth-generating. According to Islamic tradition of philosophy, we human beings have a God-belief-generator faculty, that is, *Fitrah*. This faculty equally blessed to everyone and can generate knowledge of God in appropriate normal circumstances. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, some sufficient accounts can be found in various traditions that indicate to the probability of theistic beliefs. One of these approaches is the "Truthful Argument" in Islamic philosophy. Before

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dealing with this argument, it should be noted that most of objections about the conclusiveness of theistic arguments arise from a misapprehension of what they are to prove. The objectors assume that each argument must prove the whole doctrine of theism, whereas each argument has a special message and may prove one or some elements of the doctrine.

It was Ibn Sina (Abu 'Ali al-Husayn 980-1037) who first used the term "The Truthful Argument" in his works. His version of the truthful argument is based upon essential contingency. In *Al-Esharat Wa Al-Tanbihat*, Ibn Sina called this argument the Truthful Argument, because in proposing it there is no mediation of God's actions and creatures like motion, universe, design, cause and effect and so on. After rejecting sophistry and accepting the reality as such, he says the anything's existence is either necessary or contingent. If it is contingent, the existent depends for its existence upon something else, which is in turn either depends on another thing or is a necessary being. If the second thing is contingent, depends still upon another, and the sequence of depending things can keep on ad infinitum. Therefore, the sequence ultimately has to terminate by a necessary existent. That is accordingly an eternal and imperishable being. Later on some philosophers developed Ibn Sina's argument.

4. 2. Tabatabaei's account of truthful argument

In *comments on Asfar and Usul-I Falsafeh Wa Rawish-I Realism*, Tabatabaei remarks that it is possible to argue for the necessary being by considering existence itself with respect to the eternal necessity of existence, without any help from other philosophical principles as a mediation. Tabatabaei holds that the simple and evident path to argue for the existence of God is through God-given nature (*Fitrah*). According to him, human consciousness and perception by their very nature makes evident the existence of God as well as the existence of the world. This comprehension and knowledge exist in human beings and cannot be doubted. Nobody can doubt his own existence, such an existence is self-evident. Suggesting these preliminaries, the truthful argument is proposed as follows:

- 1) The reality of being exists with no condition: It would be impossible for the reality of being to be non-existent; even the assumption of its non-existence requires its existence. The sceptic cannot doubt the reality of being without assuming his existence.
- 2) Since it would be impossible for the reality of being to be non-existent, thus the reality of being is necessary being *per se*.
- 3) As a result, there is a being that is necessary *per se*, and the existence of other beings depend upon its existence; in other words, they receive

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their existence from it.

In fact, the principle that “there is an eternal necessary being” is evident for human beings, and all theistic arguments are only to draw people’s attention to it. Tabatabaei maintains that the truthful argument does not prove the eternal necessary being; rather it only removes people’s inattention to their natural knowledge of it. Contrary to the sophist and sceptic, Tabatabaei maintains that the perception of this necessary reality is immutable and can never be proven false. We call this Immutable Reality, which is eternal and imperishable, God. In fact, the truthful argument proves the eternal existence, the knowledge of which is self-evident. This is the border line between sophistry and philosophy; because the sophist denies the reality itself. It should be noted that the truthful argument considers the essence of God, not His attributes and His actions; the reality that is the eternal necessary existence.

In spite of Calvin-Plantinga’s external model of immediate knowledge of God, the truthful argument does not employ external experience for immediacy of knowledge of God. In other words, the truthful argument indicates that our knowledge of God is by presence, not representation, because there is no mediation here at all. That is to say, as it has been stated already, Calvin affirmed a naturally implanted knowledge of God or *sensus divinitatis* and in addition, a knowledge of God regarding the external manifestation of the creation. Some of his commentators interpreted this account of natural knowledge of God as an inferential argument from empirical features of the world. In contrast, others including Plantinga refuse such an interpretation and contend that for Calvin, the natural knowledge of God is exclusively immediate. They hold that we have an innate disposition to form theistic beliefs when the disposition is triggered by experiential circumstances. Therefore, our belief in God is not based on argument or inference from other beliefs.

Tabatabaei draws our attention to the point that the premise “the reality of being exists” and the premise “sophistry is false” have eternal necessity. He also remarks that accepting them needs no argument, it rather needs just admonishment. As imagination of reality is sufficient for assenting it, imagination of the meaning of eternal necessity is sufficient for assenting it as well. Therefore, the first proposition which human beings have no choice but to accept is the reality of being itself with eternally necessary. It should be noted that the truthful argument is immune from confusing between concept and meaning; because the target of the argument is not a concept, but the external reality.⁴ Yet, there are various ways for people to seek the existence of God. Majority of people, because of their continuous concern with material things and their being drowned in the pleasures of the

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senses, have difficulties to return to their God-given nature (*Fitrah*). Drawing attention to the creation of the world and its order is a path towards God.

5. Conclusion

As we have seen, the Reformed tradition has endorsed a kind of natural theology, namely, moderate one. Because firstly, the Reformed tradition has affirmed a natural knowledge of God apart from revelation. Secondly, the tradition has believed that theistic arguments are permissible, if not necessary. Thirdly, as I have argued, the direct acquaintance with God does not necessarily entail that natural theology is impossible or unnecessary. Although belief in God is a properly basic belief, there is still need for the evidence and argument of natural theology to confirm or strengthen theistic beliefs. Moreover, if the arguments of natural theology are not necessary for the epistemic justification of faith, they are necessary and appropriate for someone else to join theists in their beliefs. In addition, they are necessary and appropriate for defending religious beliefs against objections to and alleged contradictions in religious truths.

Moreover, the basicity of belief in God would not prevent a theist from being able to give reasons and evidence to confirm or strengthen theists' beliefs as well as to convince others why they should believe in God. There is no conflict between basicity of belief in God and the possibility of evidence and the argument of natural theology. It has been argued that if theistic arguments do not prove the existence of God beyond the possibility of doubt, they can be construed as establishing a strong probability for God's existence and thereby silence many unbelievers; a probabilistic argument makes the hypothesis of theism more plausible. Moreover, at least, some arguments of natural theology are good ones; they are able to respond to the evidentialistic challenge. Accordingly, there would be no room for this challenge.

Notes

1- Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality*, p. 71; cf. pp. 72-73. Cf. Plantinga, "Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 15 (1980), pp. 49-63.

2- Plantinga speaks of basic belief in God as the best way to believe in Him. There is, of course, considerable difference between basic belief being the *best* way to believe in God and being the *correct* way.

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3- J.J. Van Oosterzee, *Christian Dogmatics*, trans. John Watson Watson and Maurice J. Evans, and ed. Henry B. Smith and Philip Schaff, Vol. 1., Vol. 1., p. 241.

4- See: Tabatabaei's comments in footnote of: Mulla Sadra, *Al-Hikmat al-Mutaaliyyeh fi al-Asfar al-Aqliyyeh al-Arbaah*, vol. 6, p. 14.

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