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Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology and Religious Extremism: Some Historical Evidences*

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Abstract

According to Plantinga's reformed epistemology, as perceptual beliefs, religious beliefs are properly basic, and therefore need no additional justification. But as it has been said frequently, this idea may lead to relativism. In this paper, first, we argue that not only its relativistic aspect allows for religious extremism, but also it could be used to justify that kind of extremism. Then, reciting some historical testimonies, including John Calvin, Khawarij, Ibn Taymiyye and Seyyed Qutb, we suggest that in principle, for many centuries extremists have derived a benefit from an idea similar to reformed epistemology to justify committing violence and other unacceptable behaviors.

Keywords: *Alvin Plantinga, reformed epistemology, religious extremism, relativism.*

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Introduction

As much as Plantinga's reformed epistemology (RE) was very effective and has some recommendations, it has received considerable critics and rejections. Usually, such criticisms focus on theoretical aspect and, especially neglect one of its problematic aspects from practical point of view. Probably, that is because for the People in developed countries, including philosophers, who live in modern societies in the West, this negative aspect is not outstanding. But who live in societies which are toward extremism, comprehend that how such relativistic thesis could serve to extremism. The irony is that in such societies, religious intellectuals welcome to RE and consider it as a good means in order to both escape extremism and keep the religious faith.

In this paper, we will suggest that in reality, RE could serve as a justification for committing violence and religious extremism. Furthermore, its basic idea is not so creative, but a simple version of it could be found in some religious and mystical traditions. Calvin and Barth are known as pioneers of Plantinga, but we suggest that this is not confined to western culture and in the East, as much as, the West, there are such ideas.

The main claims of RE

We know what RE asserts. But here we point to some basic elements directly related to my concern.

1. Traditional foundationalism is not satisfactory, because of its dependence to evidentialism, the problem of self-justifying of basic beliefs and their restricting to perceptual and rational beliefs. (Plantinga, 1983: 59-61)

2. As an alternative to foundationalism, he introduces a new epistemic rule and criteria, which is known as reformed or moderate foundationalism or RE. According to RE, every normative judgment concerning the beliefs of a person, or a group of peoples, is dependent to his own epistemic and cognitive atmosphere and mood. But its surprising demand is that belief in God is really a basic one and we are justified to hold it, without basing that belief on other beliefs. (Plantinga, <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/religion-and-epistemology>). In other words, "It is entirely right, rational, reasonable,

and proper to believe in God without any evidence or argument at all” (Plantinga, 1983: 17). The main question is this: why evidentialist believes in the past, in the existence of other persons and other minds and material objects in the absence of any argument, but in the case of believe in God the same rule does not apply, while the epistemic status is the same in both cases?

3. He considers the sense of Divinity as a peculiar sense to some people who have original and rich spiritual life. Beliefs issues from that sense are properly basic and therefore are justified.

Religious extremism

It is commonly said that today is the time for battle of ideas. Every practice and action based on an idea or assertion and what we assert theoretically functions as a foundation or a motive to act in accordance with it. What we consider as religion, although beliefs are its essential part, but never confined to certain subjective and doxastic aspect. As Peirce said, “It is absurd to say that religion is a mere belief. ... religion is a life, and as a life can be identified with a belief, only provided that belief be a living belief, a thing to be lived rather than said or thought” (Peirce, 1974: 306). Holy books of certain religions as well as the traditions of prophets clearly confirm the social aspects of such religions. But it is possible that somebody's conception of a religion would imply to problematic, radical and controversial beliefs. In this circumstances religious extremism rises.

Two terms of “religious fundamentalism and “religious extremism” come together. Far from its first meaning, today “fundamentalism” refers to “extreme and agonized defense of a dying way of life.” (Marsden, 2006: 4). But, according to religious extremism, “People with strong religious belief want to force their view of the word on others. They feel that only those who follow their “true” religion should be able to make important decisions. It has been said that: “The potential for violent conflict exists when our beliefs command us to do something aggressive to another group... like take their lands because we believe our deity [God] promised it to us.’ (Dan Smith, 2003)”

Thus, the latter is more radical than the former, and I think the former has less negative results to social life. Therefore, in this paper,

we concentrate on religious extremism. Now it's time to ask what is the relation between RE and religious extremism?

The great pumpkin objection and religious extremism

This assertion that believe in God is properly basic, confronted with many objections, which the most important of them is the great pumpkin objection. If believe in God was basic, then every belief would be so. The core of this objection is that RE has some relativist implication. I think that Plantinga's response is not clear and satisfactory. He says, "what reformed epistemology holds is that there are widely realized circumstances in which belief in God is properly basic, but why should that be thought to commit him to the idea that just about any belief is properly basic in any circumstances, or even to the vastly weaker claim that for any belief there are circumstances in which it is properly basic." (Plantinga, 1983: 74).

Trying to answer the great pumpkin objection, Plantinga claims: "Followers of Bertrand Russell and Madelyn Murry O'Hare may disagree; but how is that relevant? Must my criteria, or those of the Christian community, conform to their examples? Surly not! The Christian community is responsible to its set of examples, not to theirs." (Planting, 1983: 77) But you imagine that instead of planting, an extremist makes such assertion, as it frequently happens. It is possible that just when you hold some religious belief as basic, other one considers certain other religious belief or beliefs as basic, as well. Indeed, Plantinga takes a seris of Christian beliefs as basic ones. But if, using same rule and criteria, another one takes different series of religious beliefs as basic, beliefs which plainly are extremistic, how we can escape this contradiction? If, for instance, a person holds the belief that "it is not only permissible killing unbelievers, but preferable", how Plantinga could stop this illegitimate usage of his thesis? This is not a thought experiment, but we can cite many concrete examples, as we will do. Thus, the problem roots in his basic claim, that is, "the belief in God is properly basic".

It is evident that this is a version of the great pumpkin objection. Believing that the great pumpkin returns every Halloween, has no considerable effects in human social life, but asserting that "it is not

only permissible killing unbelievers, but preferable”, has a trouble effects. great Pumpkin objection becomes more and more important, if we replace it with our radical assertion.

Plantinga allows some kind of rational assessment, but it is far from the traditional foundationalism or evidentialism. Distinguishing between properly basic beliefs with other beliefs, he says: “...A Belief B has warrant for S if and only if the relevant segments (the segments involved in the production of B) are functioning properly in cognitive environment sufficiently similar to that for which S's faculties are designed; and the modules of the design plan governing the production of B are (1) aimed at truth, and (2) such that there is a high objective probability that a belief formed in accordance with those modules (in that sort of cognitive environment) is true; and the more firmly S believes B the more warrant B has for. (Plantinga, 2009: 439-440)

But theory of warrant would not be helpful, because to claim that believe in God is properly basic, could not satisfy warrant obligation. I suggest that in this case, essentially warrant theory has nothing to do with his reformed epistemology, because the first could not remove relativistic mark of the later.

Plantinga's reformed epistemology implicitly considers normative judgment concerning the beliefs of a person to be depended to the set of his beliefs. This relativistic perspective leads to solipsism. A solipsist is resistant to contrary perspectives, viewpoints and beliefs such a person not only presents no argument for his beliefs, but also considers contrary arguments invalid and absurd. Thus, he imposes what he considers as truth, without any possibility of error. It seems that Plantinga's theory is a roll-back to before 17th century epistemological atmosphere, i.e., before John lock and the tolerance idea. Ironically, Plantinga gives permission to people who take contrary evidences insufficient, to emphasize on their assertions. Plainly, in social life, this approach is not safe, if lead to radical actions.

Now, it is necessary to consider Plantinga's answer to this later objection. He maintains: “a person who carelessly arrives at morally repugnant beliefs is guilty, even if he holds that beliefs should be arrived at carelessly.” (Planting, 1983: 36)

This is insufficient and in turn confronts with another objection. It is possible that others consider my radical beliefs invalid, while my opinion is different. Inspired reformed epistemology, if I insist on my extremist and immoral beliefs and realize them in my actions, could Plantinga find any Postern? This objection becomes more and more important, if we outline his view concerning the sense of Divinity. Everyone could claim to be equipped with that sense, as many extremists do. Every religious extremist appeal to something similar to sense of Divinity, otherwise he never could stimulate his followers to do what he finds as right choice. The only possible way to justify religious violence is this.

In practice, if, on the ground of something like the sense of Divinity as well as my military, religious or charismatic power, I insist on my radical beliefs and realizing them, which results in committing violence, how you can stop me by arguing against my opinions or by appealing to universal moral rules, or something like them? The point is that, rational reasoning couldn't stop any extremist, but every extremist needs certain amount of rationalization to justify his extremism.

Blanshard's predication

I think that, Brand Blanshard gives the most Decisive answer to Plantinga, as if he has predicated RE: "We cannot dismiss the claim to such knowledge by saying that we have never ourselves experienced it and do not understand what is claimed. There are many vivid and important experiences that remain sealed to most of us. We may never have followed the mathematical flights of von Neumann, or caught what Schonberg was trying to say with his strange new scale, or experimented with LSD. Still, these things are not wholly cut off from us, for we know the kind of experience that mathematics and music give and can improve our grasp of it; and though the visions of the LSD addict seem remote, we at least know their conditions and could produce these in ourselves. But the experiences alleged by Barth and Brunner are not like this. They are not only meaningless to reason but unachievable by any effort or technique. They have no conditions in the brain or mind of the person who has them; they are discontinuous with our psychology, with our logic, and even with our ethical

ideals. They are granted to some persons and withheld from others on grounds that are admitted to be impenetrable. Even by the person who has them they are incapable of analysis or expression, and by the person who does not have them they cannot be engendered, examined, or imagined. (Blanshard, 1966:p. 69)

Thus, Blanshard rejects Plantinga's assumption that religious experiences are same as perceptual ones. We have the capacity to justify and explore perceptual experiences, while we have no means to explore and justify religious experiences and assertions at all. Blanshard describes religious and mythical assertions as this: "They are not only meaningless to reason but unachievable by any effort or technique. They have no conditions in the brain or mind of the person who has them; they are discontinuous with our psychology, with our logic, and even with our ethical ideals. They are granted to some persons and withheld from others on grounds that are admitted to be impenetrable", (ibid, p 142)

As a final assessment, he says: "The attempt to defend religious knowledge by a return to irrationalism will not serve. The universe is not to be conceived as a gigantic layer cake in which the lower stratum is governed by scientific law and an intelligible logic, and the upper stratum is somehow released from these restrictions into the freedom of incoherence. The theologians who have tried to fix these boundaries have not been able to respect them, and in the attempt to do so they have not only reduced religious knowledge to something dangerously like zero but managed to cast a skeptical shadow over " (ibid, p 211)

Religious problems, such as moral problems, are not merely theoretical problems, but have many practical implications. Therefore, to evaluate reformed epistemology, it is not permissible to neglect practical implications and results. Psychological characteristics of human beings induce them to extremism, but some suitable means as Plantinga's, and some ground as RE, has the effect of paving the way for extremism.

Some historical evidences

In the history of the West, and especially, of the East, there are certain famous elites and movements, whose Kay doctrine have some

similarities with RE. Unfortunately, most of them have extremist tendency. In this place, in order to show Unagreeable effects of such doctrines, we briefly explore certain extremist doctrines which have something to do with reformed epistemology.

I. John Calvin

John Calvin is one of the most famous religious extremists. His ruling over Geneva in the 16th century is a good example of the ruling of an extremist doctrine. As he himself said, we Know that Plantinga finds the roots of reformed epistemology in Calvin. Aleksander Santrac shows that Plantinga borrowed the term of “the sense of Divinity” of Calvin, although there is some differences between them. (Santrac, 2011).

In natural sciences, because of methodological necessities, this is not permissible that the conduct of scientist enters in our judgments concerning a theory. But, as we argued in the beginning, in religious doctrines, it is different. It seems that we should not ignore some relations between Calvin’s theological doctrine, in the one hand, and his conduct as an extremist ruler, in the other hand. At least, his appealing to the sense of Divinity, which served as a permission for his extremism, is problematic, as if it was as an excuse in order to commit violence.

II. Khawarig

Khawarig, as an extremist group, was the primary version of Daish and Taliban. They committed violence and imposed strong religious rules. It was said that “they was judged without any basis, but according to their own conception. Therefore, there were no criteria concerning religious knowledge, practice and leadership. (Moftakhari, 2000: 91). What constitutes the essence of that kind of extremism? They followed a rule like Planitinga’s RE. It was said that: “one of the most important theoretical rules of Khawarig was the sharp gap between “I” and “other” in religious beliefs. I’m just in the right way and no other one, except my colleagues. Everyone who is not with me, is in the camp of pagans, even if he has been called Muslim.” (Alashari, 1415: 7-8). This is an instance of religious solipsism which also involved in RE.

III. Ibn Taymiyye and Seyyed Qutb

Ibne Teymiyye (1263- 1328) is one of the most controversial figures in Islamic world. He rejects rational arguments which are not based on Quran and Tradition of the Prophet Mohammad. Reason is valuable as long as it is parallel to religious texts. According to him, even concerning theological aspect of religion, for example, the existence of God, only Quran gives true rational reasons. (Great Islamic encyclopedia, paper no. 1008). Also, similar to Plantinga, he suggests that: "therefore, if we reject reason and rational knowledge in some case, it is not same as rejecting all of rationality and rational items. (Ibn Taymiyye, 1954). That is because alone pure religious viewpoint is rational. As a Hanbali Muslim, his conception of reason rejects philosophical approaches and claims that in the Quran and the tradition of prophets, God manifests himself through natural signs not rational and logical arguments. (Ibn Taymiyye, 1972: 158)

Inspired Ibne Teymiyye, Seyyed Qutb based the new form of religious extremism in the Islamic world. Seyyed Qutb himself confesses to the role of Ibn Taymiyye in constructing his theory. Seyyed Qutb maintains that "the struggle between the believers and their enemies is in essence a struggle of belief and not in any way of anything else" (Qutb, 2007:110). Also, "the whole world is steeped in jahiliyyah [=Ignorance] ", a "jahiliyyah . . . based on rebellion against God's hakimiyyah [sovereignty] on earth".(ibid:510-511) All societies, including those claiming to be Muslim, were regarded by Qutb as mujtama'at jahiliyyah (pagan societies). Man is at the crossroads and that is the choice: Islam or jahiliyyah. In the base of these judgments, he derived his extremist conclusion, which consists in to remove all jahili influences through jihad (holy war). According to the Qutbian system, Jihad (either violent or non-violent) is the means by which "all satanic forces are abolished and God's hakimiyyah is established on earth". (Qutb, 2007: 154-183). But his controversial thesis is that "As jahili societies will always be in opposition to Islam Jihad for Qutb has two primary functions: the defense of the right of Muslims to believe and live by principles of Islam and also the struggle to establish Allah's sovereignty worldwide In Qutb's opinion, to reduce jihad to self-defence is to diminish the greatness of the Islamic way of life and leaves open the possibility that mankind will be left "on the whole earth

in evil, in chaos and in servitude to lords other than God". (Quoted from: <http://www.islamdaily.org>)

Seyyed Qutb, in turn, shaped theoretical basis of Alqyaede and Ayman al Zawahiri. (Murr, 2004). The foundational fundamentalist thesis which they learn of Ibn Taymiyye is that what we believe, whether other people consider it rational or not, is legitimate and true; and we can practice and behave in the base of our own comprehension. This idea is the result of some thesis very similar to Plantinga's RE. To put it more clear, the fideism involved in RE, which remarked by some critics (e.g. Penelhum, 1983), in the one hand, and Seyyed Qutb's view point, in the other hand, both confirm the personal conceptions concerning religious matters, without any respect to what the majority of people believe.

These historical cases have something in common with RE, that is, to embrace Personal conceptions instead of following universally authentic reasoning. Even if in one case you were exempt of arguing for your assertions, you would find a good base for extremism.

Discussion

What I offer is basically the Great Pumpkin Objection to RE, except that religious extremist hypotheses are substituted for the Great Pumpkin hypothesis. These differ from the Great Pumpkin hypothesis in that there might be serious this-worldly consequences if someone acted on the hypothesis (e.g., people who have different beliefs might lose their lives). But here is a problem. Plantinga and other defenders of RE think that they have a satisfactory response to the Great Pumpkin Objection. They might be right, or they might be wrong. If they're right, then their response to the Great Pumpkin Objection is equally a response to my objection in which the Great Pumpkin hypothesis is replaced by a hypothesis based on religious extremism. Also, Plantinga does not respond to the Great Pumpkin Objection by saying that belief in the Great Pumpkin is harmless; hence his actual response is not refuted by an argument in which the belief is harmful. But if Plantinga and other defenders of RE are wrong, this would need to be shown. There is a large literature on this question, involving delicate issues in epistemology. In this paper contributing to this theoretical

debate is not my concern, because my hypothesis is that the response of the defenders of RE to the Great Pumpkin Objection is not satisfactory. After all, it seems that Blanshard's reasoning is the most reliable basis to defend my hypothesis.

Thus, this research is a preliminary one to study the results of realization of RE, on the one hand, and its similarities with certain traditional theories, on the other hand.

As it was said before, for western people who live in the modern societies, it is hard to comprehend dangerous misuses of such theories as RE. Essentially, peoples who experienced extremism and irrational theories could apprehend the trouble results of rejecting evidentialism and reasoning. Therefore, RE could be as a bad weapon in the hand of bad peoples, as historical instances confirm this. It should be emphasized that practical results of Plantinga's RE follows no logical process or reasoning, but it is largely issues from human psychological characteristics. RE could serve as an excuse. Our appealing to excuse is not the result of a rational process.

Even if it was the case that extremists are successful because of "their organizational structure than their theology" (Iannaccone and Berman, 2006), this explains the causes of extremism, while it is evident that in justifying every version of extremism and inducing people to it, it is necessary appealing to some theoretical and theological foundations. Every extremist needs an unquestionable territory in order to force people to obey, and that is what RE supplies. From practical aspect, in the religious problems, evidentialism is the safest approach and RE is the most dangerous one.

Conclutions

We showed that, one the hypothesis that the response of the defenders of RE to the Great Pumpkin Objection is not satisfactory, RE could be used as an extremist mean or as an excuse. We presented two reasons for this claim. First, Blanshard's argument, which we found it as a good response for RE. Second, some historical evidences which confirm similarities between RE and some extremist ideologies.

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