



Augustine's Ethics of Belief and Avoiding Violence in Religious Disputes

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Abstract

This article is a study of how Augustine's ethics of belief shaped his arguments against unbelief and its legacy in using coercion to settle disputes. After considering the arguments for belief presented by Augustine, the article studies how these were shaped by his understanding of the problem of evil and how the Fall influenced free will. What is noted to be of benefit in Augustine is that he offers arguments in favor of belief, and is convinced that he has shown unbelief to be based on unsound reasoning. By way of contrast, a number of theologians (such as Tertullian, John Calvin, and those under the heading of Reformed Epistemology) are considered who do not believe that arguments are necessary to support belief or reject unbelief. These are contrasted with Augustine and it is argued that they have significant shortcomings in this respect. However, the article concludes that Augustine could have gone farther in supporting the claim that it is clear that God exists, and his own shortcomings have been used to justify coercion in religious belief. If common ground is to be achieved this problem must be corrected and an adequate foundation for clarity must be established.

Keywords

Augustine, ethics of belief, free will, God's existence, religious violence/coercion

Augustine's development from young skeptic, to Manichean, to Christian and Church Father involved a wrestling with ideas that has had lasting positive impact on the development of theology and philosophy.¹ He developed what can be called an ethics of belief in which he maintains that there are some beliefs all humans should hold, and the failure to hold these is culpable. However, there has also be a

¹ Portions of this article appear also in my book *The Clarity of God's Existence: The Ethics of Belief After the Enlightenment*, Wipf and Stock, 2008.

negative contribution by Augustine due to a tension in terms of why he asserts these beliefs should be held. On the one hand, he offers brilliant arguments that show the absurdity of beliefs like polytheism and Greek materialism. But he also is willing to resort to force against some opponents, and has been used as a justification for the use of violence by others coming later. Here it will be argued that this tension can be resolved by noting certain presuppositions held by Augustine that limited his ability to give arguments. Having taken these into consideration, the paper will argue that where Augustine does give arguments to show the absurdity of a belief he is operating with a methodology to show the rational inexcusability for unbelief, but that there is also a view of the will held by Augustine that prevents him from carrying this methodology to its logical and beneficial conclusion, and instead he permits coercion in some cases.

In a number of places that will be examined here Augustine asserts that humans should believe that God exists, that only God is eternal, and that God is good and made the creation good, because there are clear arguments that demonstrate these beliefs. This is in contrast to many thinkers, including Tertullian and John Calvin, who maintained that arguments are not necessary for showing the existence of God. If modern skeptics are correct that particular arguments advanced by Augustine are insufficient, this does not affect his methodology, and leaves open the possibility for arguments that are sufficient. This demonstrates that Augustine continues to influence and participate in contemporary thinking about the ethics of belief in God by offering a robust approach to the clarity of God's existence.

Augustine's Presuppositions

Augustine operated within a Platonic worldview. This had a significant affect on how he interpreted Christianity. While he noted places that Plato came short,² he is in general agreement with the distinction drawn by Plato between mind and matter, and with an emphasis on an otherworldly fulfilment of life. Indeed, he says he had no concept of an immaterial spirit until he read the Platonists. Augustine argued that the highest good cannot be achieved in this life, and looks for a resurrection of the dead which is not a renewal of this world but a life in the heavenly world. He also emphasizes the corruption of the will,³ and consequently focuses on unbelief as impious and vain⁴

² St. Augustine. *City of God*. Translated by Henry Bettenson. London: Penguin Books, 2003. VIII.12.

³ *City of God*, XIV.11.

⁴ St. Augustine. *Confessions*. Translated by Henry Chadwick. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. VIII. ii (2).

rather than as an intellectual failure. Because sin is an act of the will, there are times when intellectual engagement will be insufficient and violence is warranted.⁵ These presuppositions go together and produce the resulting justification for violence: the highest good is not to be achieved in this world but is attained in the next life; the focus of sin is the will, and the will must be physically restrained rather than reasoned with (as one does with the intellect); this physical restraint justifies violence in some cases.

And yet Augustine did offer arguments, often very impressive, to demonstrate the absurdity of unbelief. Here it will be maintained that this tension is the result of a mixture of beliefs in Augustine. He continued to maintain Platonic influences like those just mentioned. But he also maintained that humans are guilty before God for their unbelief, and this guilt requires that he shows that unbelief is absurd. His own Platonism gets in the way of this and results in the tension that has often been influential in justifying physical violence. But there is also his attitude toward intellectual argumentation that will be explored here and it will be argued that this offers much promise.

The Ethics of Belief

The ethics of beliefs studies what humans ought to believe. Minimally, it presupposes the ought/can principle. If something ought to be believed then it must be knowable. Augustine gave a very succinct statement of what is to be believed: "When, then, the question is asked what we are to believe in regard to religion, it is not necessary to probe into the nature of things, as was done by those whom the Greeks call *physici*. . . It is enough for the Christian to believe that the only cause of all created things, whether heavenly or earthly, whether visible or invisible, is the goodness of the Creator, the one true God; and that nothing exists but Himself that does not derive its existence from Him."⁶ Christians do not need to have an understanding of the elements,⁷ the study of which so occupied the Greek philosophers. What they need to know about the world is that it was created by God.

This includes a knowledge of good and evil. "We ought to know the causes of good and evil as far as man may in this life know them, in order to avoid the mistakes and troubles of which this life is so full. For our aim must always be to reach that state of happiness in which

⁵ Brown, Peter. *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000. 234.

⁶ St. Augustine. *Enchiridion*. Washington D.C.: Regnery, 1996. ix.

⁷ *Enchiridion*, ix.

no trouble shall distress us, and no error mislead us.”⁸ Furthermore, ignorance of God, and the causes of good and evil, are among the wickedness that are condemned by God.⁹ The ought/can principle applies here: if humans ought to know, then they must be able to know. To be able to know requires that the alternative views are not possible. If they were possible, if they were rational options, then a rational being could not know which view to believe. By implication, all ought to know God, and the failure to know God is an epistemic *and* moral failure. And yet Augustine viewed the will as primary, so that even if rational arguments were given, a corrupt will would not listen and might need to be coerced. More will be considered on this in the section about free will.

Augustine called those who do not believe in God “vain” and “impious.”¹⁰ Through the arguments he gave he believed he showed that there is no excuse for failing to believe in God. It is these same impious persons that he claims Christ must die to redeem.¹¹ Part One of the *City of God* is a sustained argument to show that the gods of Rome were false and should not have been worshiped. Then in Book VIII he seeks to show that the true philosopher is the one who loves God.¹² To do this he proposes to refute those who accept the existence of a Divinity but also worship diverse and sundry other gods.¹³ Here we have belief mixed with unbelief, as opposed to the vain and impious person who does not believe at all. Both are rejected by Augustine's ethics of belief on the basis of the arguments he puts forth.

Augustine considered those who believe in gods and those who believe that all things originate from matter.¹⁴ He rejected both in favor of Platonist natural philosophy.¹⁵ This is the view that God is the author of all things, and that besides matter there also exists the soul. From this we can begin to construct his argument supporting the claim that unbelief (in terms of Roman polytheism or Greek materialism) is rationally inexcusable. First, it is clear that God exists and that he is the creator of all souls and material things.¹⁶ Second, there is no excuse for not knowing this (vs. the Greek materialists—VIII.5; the soul is eternal—XII.21; the human race is eternal—XII.10; the world is eternal or innumerable worlds—XII.12). Third, because

⁸ *Enchiridion*, xvi.

⁹ *Enchiridion*, xxv.

¹⁰ *Confessions*, VIII. ii (2).

¹¹ *Confessions*, VII. ix (14).

¹² *City of God*, VIII.1.

¹³ *City of God*, VIII.1.

¹⁴ *City of God*, VIII.5.

¹⁵ *City of God*, VIII.6.

¹⁶ *City of God*, XII.28.

the failure to know God is the root of all other sins, its heinous nature requires the atoning sacrifice of Christ (no alternative atonement is possible—XXI.18; XXI.25).

These three principles go together and are foundational for Augustine's theology. His exclusivism (the third point above) requires that all persons can know God (it is clear, the alternatives are not possible).¹⁷ If a person could not know God then they could not be held accountable for their ignorance (the ought/can principle). His exclusivism also requires that there is a need for redemption, that there is no excuse for failing to know God. The failure to know God must be an evil that is serious enough to need the atoning death of the Son of God. If failing to know God is not that serious, then the atoning payment need not be so significant. The magnitude of the first transgression results in eternal punishment for all who are outside the Savior's grace.¹⁸

The prevalence of inclusivism or pluralism in contemporary thinking is premised upon a denial of the first two principles. They assert that because it is not clear that God exists, and unbelief is not inexcusable, it cannot be the case that Christ is required for atonement by everyone. And certainly this line of reasoning holds together internally, but as we have seen Augustine rejected the initial skepticism about the ability to know God. While he concedes that some things are beyond rational demonstration,¹⁹ he clearly did not believe that this applies to the existence and nature of God, or else it could not be vain and impious to fail to believe.

Augustine's Arguments

In order to get a sense of how Augustine proceeded in proving that God exists and unbelief is inexcusable it is worthwhile to look at some passages. His focus is different from Anselm, Aquinas, the Enlightenment, or Modern approaches. These tend to focus on perfect beings, first causes, and design. In contrast, Augustine focused on what is eternal (without beginning). In book 7 of his *Confessions*, Augustine distinguished between temporal being and eternal being:

I turned my gaze on other things. I saw that to you they owe their existence, and that in you all things are finite, not in the sense that the space they occupy is bounded but in the sense that you hold all things in your hand by your truth. So all things are real insofar as they have being, and the term 'falsehood' applies only when something is thought to have being which does not. And I saw that each thing is

¹⁷ Brown, 318.

¹⁸ *City of God*, XXI.12.

¹⁹ *City of God*, XXI.5.

harmonious not only with its place but with its time, **and that you alone are eternal** and did not first begin to work after innumerable periods of time.²⁰

I added the bold to emphasize a method behind Augustine's reasoning that can possibly be used as a key to figuring out both if God exists and if it is clear that God exists. This requires looking at whether there is anything that is eternal, and if "eternal" can be predicated of anything besides God. At least this much can be said here: if it can be shown that the claim "nothing is eternal," and the predication of "eternal" to anything besides God, involved a simple contradiction, then it can be said to be clear that God exists.

Augustine held that only God, as an infinite, unchangeable spirit, can be eternal. All other things are corruptible and changing. The material world is corruptible, and if it had always existed it would already be in its final state of corruption. The human soul is aiming at a final end; if it is eternal then it should already have attained this end or it can never attain this end.²¹ The alternative to these is that there is an eternal spirit (non-material intelligence) who created the material world and human souls.

The Problem of Evil

Perhaps the most significant objection to belief in God is the problem of evil. Certainly for Augustine this was a central consideration, and was a motivating factor in his becoming a Manichean. However, as he began to solve the problem of evil by addressing the nature of evil he moved from his Manicheanism to Christian theism. His solution is worth noting because it shows both that Augustine believed the problem could be solved in a way that upheld the clarity of God's existence and the inexcusability of unbelief, and demonstrates the nature of sin as a failure to know God and a lack in living the good life. Augustine resolved the problem in the following manner:

Accordingly, whatever things exist are good, and evil into whose origins I was inquiring is not a substance, for if it were a substance, it would be good. Either it would be an incorruptible substance, a great good indeed, or a corruptible substance, which could be corrupted only if it were good. Hence I saw and it was made clear to me that you made all things good, and there are absolutely no substances which you did not make. As you did not make all things equal, all things are good in the sense that taken individually they are good, and all things taken together are very good. For our God has made 'all things very good' (Gen. 1:31).

²⁰ Confessions, VII. xii (18)-xv (21).

²¹ *City of God*, XII.21.

For you evil does not exist at all, and not only for you but for your created universe, because there is nothing outside it which could break in and destroy the order which you have imposed upon it.²²

This solution inevitably requires looking at Augustine's view of the freedom of the will. Augustine holds a compatibilist view of the will in that he believes the will can be both predetermined and free.²³ The will can be free and have been caused by necessity.²⁴ What is important for the will to be free is that it does what it wants. "Our wills are ours and it is our wills that affect all that we do by willing, and which would not have happened if we had not willed. But when anyone has something done to him against his will, here, again, the effective power is will, not his own will, but another's."²⁵

Free Will and Responsibility

A common response to Augustine is to dismiss human responsibility as being incompatible with the foreknowledge and predestination of God. Augustine affirmed that God can be known but also emphasized slavery to sin. Augustine's methodology conflicts with the claim that since humanity was corrupted in the fall they have an excuse for their unbelief, and yet he is sometimes interpreted this way (Pelagius seems to have understood Augustine as offering an excuse for sin). This objection to clarity and inexcusability combines elements of the objection that humans do not have free will with the idea that humans are now inclined toward evil. The sovereignty of God in predestinating, the affects of the fall to make humans will what is evil, and the continued freedom and responsibility of wrong decisions, are able to be consistently maintained in a compatibilist system where freedom is located in wants and distinguished from ability. Augustine preserved both that there are clear arguments that demonstrate the existence and nature of God, and that the human will after the fall is a slave to sin. This means that humans could know God if they wanted to (and are therefore free and responsible), but they do not want to.²⁶

Some might attempt to use this unwillingness as an excuse. This excuse says: "I cannot know God because I am fallen and unwilling, but being fallen and unwilling is outside of my control and is therefore not my fault." At first this looks like a very promising excuse. However, upon closer examination it is unsuccessful. The problem is

²² *Confessions*, VII. xii (18)-xiii (19).

²³ *City of God*, V.10;XIV.11.

²⁴ *City of God*, V.10.

²⁵ *City of God*, V.10.

²⁶ *City of God*, V.10.

that it speaks as if being fallen is something outside of the person forcing them to act in a certain way against their will. Rather, to be fallen is a description of a person who is not willing to know God.

Historically, both the Pelagians and the Augustinians have affirmed that the fall does not remove human responsibility. The Pelagians have done so by denying that the effects of the fall are total.

Pelagius believed that God gave grace to human beings, certainly, but his primary grace was the freedom to choose and respond. Those who chose the path of goodness would be given further encouragement by God to progress in the spiritual life . . . [Augustine] believed the human race's capacity for free moral choice was so damaged by the ancient (and continuing) fall from grace and enlightenment that even the desire to return to God has first to be supplied by God's prevenient grace. All desire for, and movement toward, the Good was the gift of God.²⁷

Augustine affirmed the sovereignty of God over all aspects of human life, while Pelagius seems to leave human choice outside of God's sovereignty.

The consideration of the fall and predestination as an excuse should be focused on whether a person can use reason to choose what to believe. If not, then that person is not responsible. But if a person can and does not, then he/she deserves the consequences of failing to use reason to know God. This failure itself is sin, rather than being the result of sin. And it is this sin that results in all other kinds of sin. It could be called the root sin. It might even be called the "original sin" in the sense of "first sin." In eating the fruit, Adam and Eve believed the serpent, that they could know good and evil in the way that God knows good and evil. It is a fundamental contradiction to think that a temporal, finite being could know good and evil in the way that God does, who is an eternal, infinite being.

In this sense all unbelievers commit the original sin (if it is clear that God exists). All believe something about God and themselves that is a fundamental contradiction. And yet it is they who believe it, and so it is they who are responsible. Furthermore, they are free at the present time to change their minds and believe in God. If they do not want to do so because of various considerations, then they should be content because they are doing what they want.

To use the fall or predestination as an excuse becomes ridiculous: "I want to believe in God but I cannot because my fallen nature keeps me from doing so," or "I want to believe in God but I cannot because God predestined me to unbelief." Both assume the truth of

²⁷ McGuckin, John Anthony. *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2004. 257.

what they claim to not be able to believe in: "I believe that unbelief is a sin and is therefore false and that it is true that God does not exist," or "I believe that God exists and that he is keeping me from believing that God exists."

But how does this relate to the issue of a fallen will and the supposed need for coercion in the case of obstinate unbelief? Augustine's own conversion may have led him to give the analysis that one can understand and yet not act accordingly. As he prayed for help in overcoming sin, he heard a voice that told him to read, and he took up the Bible and read Romans 13:13–14 which tells believers to avoid sin. But the scriptures also say that if you know the truth, the truth will set you free (John 8:32). The implication is that if one is not free, one does not know the truth. It is here that Pelagius believed that Augustine allowed an excuse: I could not do good because I had a corrupt will. But as we saw above, when compatibalism is properly understood it rules out these kinds of excuses. Similarly, there is no room for coercion because coercion does not, and cannot, aid in helping another increase in understanding. A changed will is connected with coming to know the truth. Both may be dependent on the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit (as the primary cause), but this does not rule out the reality of secondary causes. When believers have attempted to coerce the will they are by-passing the reality that the understanding moves the will and are thus ignoring the reality of secondary causes.

Attempts to Avoid Arguments

In contrast to Augustine, many notable theologians have maintained that arguments are not necessary. They have held this either because they do not believe it is clear that God exists, or that it is clear in some other way. "Good God! cried Demea, interrupting him, where are we? Zealous defenders of religion allow that the proofs of a Deity fall short of perfect evidence!"²⁸ Why should we expect perfect evidence, evidence that demonstrates the impossibility of the contrary? We do not have this in many areas of life, why should we expect it in matters pertaining to belief in God? The need for proof depends on the consequences. Where there are little or no consequences then proof (in the sense of certainty, or showing the impossibility of the contrary) will not be as important. But where the consequences are serious, a matter of eternal life or eternal death, then proof becomes necessary. Skeptics point out, correctly, that if we cannot know then we cannot be held accountable. If we cannot know, and are asked

²⁸ Hume, David. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1955. 19.

by God why we did not believe, then we can reply “not enough evidence!”²⁹

An argument is necessary to show clarity, and clarity is necessary to support the claim that ignorance of God is culpable. This is because immediate perception is insufficient and because challenges must be addressed. Immediate perception of a chair is not an inference/argument. However, perceiving a chair is not a conclusion either. “I see a chair” might be immediate, but “I see an external object that exists apart from minds” is an interpretation of the perception. Appearance is not reality. Many perceptions are noted to be erroneous or misleading, such as the appearance of an oar in water, or that the earth is flat. To say that one does not need an argument because one has direct perception of God is to confuse appearance/perception with reality.

Furthermore, all experience/perception must be interpreted. But this is where differences arise. Is the chair a material object that exists apart from minds? Is the chair an idea in the mind of God? Is the chair part of maya (illusion) that is due to avidya (ignorance) and must be overcome through moksha (enlightenment)? The same can be said for immediate perceptions of God. Is God an existing being? Is God an idea in a mind? Is God the result of brain chemistry? The immediate perception is insufficient and requires interpretation which means an argument is necessary. Clarity requires that the correct interpretation is clear to reason so that accepting some other interpretation is inexcusable.

Arguments are also necessary because there are opposing views which raise relevant and important challenges to theistic belief and Historic Christianity. If these cannot be responded to through rational argumentation then unbelief has an excuse. It is therefore an important feature of Historic Christianity that it must respond to challenges in order to make sense of its claim that humans need redemption from unbelief. The views to be considered are the view that philosophy is irrelevant (and even perhaps harmful) expressed here by Tertullian, the view that all persons know God directly through a *sensus divinitatus* (expressed here by Calvin), and the view that belief in God can be warranted apart from an argument (expressed here by Reformed Epistemology).

Tertullian

Tertullian did hold that Christ is necessary for redemption. However, Tertullian did not think that philosophy was necessary and instead

²⁹ Bertrand Russell is reported to have said this would be his reply if it turns out that God does exist and asks why Russell did not believe.

relied on a kind of devotion to Christ. He did offer many arguments on many different topics so it is not clear how his view of Jerusalem and Athens works out in practice. It is impossible to avoid offering some kind of argument for one's position. But Tertullian represents a kind of disdain for philosophy which he viewed as inherently heretical.

He [Paul] had been at Athens, and had in his interviews (with its philosophers) become acquainted with that human wisdom which pretends to know the truth, whilst it only corrupts it, and is itself divided into its own manifold heresies, by the variety of its mutually repugnant sects. What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from 'the porch of Solomon,' who had himself taught that 'the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart.' Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our palmary faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides.³⁰

Tertullian seems to equate philosophy with Stoicism, Platonism, and other Greek schools. If this is the extent of philosophy then his warning is helpful but inadequate. Many problems have occurred for Christianity over the centuries in its mixing of Christian theism with non-theistic worldviews, such as Augustine's use of Platonism, and Aquinas's use of Aristoteleanism, and the contemporary attempt to mix naturalist cosmology (Darwinism) with theism. These worldviews are contradictory and cannot be mixed without jettisoning major components of one or the other.

Tertullian called persons to firm belief which requires nothing besides. But the problem with this form of fideism is the same as noted earlier. How do we know which worldview we should commit ourselves to in the fideistic fashion? Why not Roman polytheism? Tertullian has reasons (arguments) as to why Christianity is better. But now he has left fideism and is offering arguments. The question is: are the arguments sound? Do they establish inexcusability and the need for redemption? The decline of Roman polytheism and the increase of Christianity were linked to work of the Christian apologists in showing the weaknesses of polytheism.³¹

The claim that Jerusalem has nothing to do with Athens is still used today. It comes to the forefront in questions about common ground. Is there common ground between the believer and unbeliever on which they can reason together? Some deny that there is in order

³⁰ Tertullian. "The Prescription Against Heretics." in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Translated by Rev. Peter Holmes. Vol. 3. Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004. 246.

³¹ Stark, Rodney. *The Rise of Christianity*. Harper, SanFrancisco, 1997.

to emphasize the reality of the fall. However, fallen humans are still humans. The fallen intellect is still an intellect. The laws of thought that govern the intellect are still in that position for the fallen intellect. The difference is that the fallen intellect does not use reason to know God. The law of non-contradiction is still binding. It is common ground in that it is used by all intellects. The fallen person is still held rationally accountable for using reason, and where he/she does not there are consequences for this.³²

Some hold the view that there is no common ground because they have tried giving arguments and the other person did not accept the conclusion. This is phrased in saying that reason is ineffectual. This is sometimes followed with the assertion that what is needed is an experience of some kind. However, the problem often lies in the actual argument that was given. Perhaps the person did not accept the argument because it was an invalid or unsound argument, and not because they are wretched and fallen. Many arguments that have been given are simply unsound and irrelevant and should be rejected. This does not prove that there is no common ground, but that more work needs to be done.

Even when a sound argument is given it does not follow that the person will accept it. The response to a sound argument will indicate where the hearer is at in their use of reason. If it is accepted this says something about the person, if it is rejected this also says something about the person. From the Christian perspective, it reveals whether the mercy or justice of God is at work in their lives. It is said that while Paul plants, and Apollos waters, it is the Holy Spirit that gives the increase, but that it is the Holy Spirit who gives the increase does not imply that Paul should stop planting and Apollos stop watering. While at Athens (Acts 17) Paul responded to his audience (Stoics and Epicureans) with philosophical arguments. He asserted that it is in God that we live, move, and have our being. These were issues of great concern to these Greek philosophers. Some believed Paul, others did not. Paul himself warned against worldly philosophy. But the qualifier "worldly" is very important. He did not say avoid philosophy itself, but that philosophy which is founded on the principles of the world. And of course a Christian theist should avoid non-theistic and non-Christian principles. But Paul also encouraged believers to have arguments in support of their view, as he showed by examples in Romans 1 and many other places.

Calvin and the *Sensus Divinitatis*

John Calvin asserted that all humans have a *sensus divinitatis*. All humans have a sense of God, a kind of immediate perception. However,

³² *City of God*, XIV.15.

this has been corrupted by the fall. Calvin attempted to establish inexcusability with reference to the *sensus divinitatis*. "First and foremost, he wants to establish the inexcusability of unbelief. To prevent anyone from being able truthfully to say 'I didn't know,' 'God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty'" (Talbot, 160). However, an immediate perception or sense of God is insufficient for reasons outlined above when considering the direct experience of mysticism. And this formulation is insufficient in a number of other ways.

Calvin did affirm that God is knowable from general revelation:

Towards the beginning of the *Institutes*, Calvin makes the point that all knowledge of God is revealed. Everything that man knows about God, the world, and his own self flows from the eternal Fount of knowledge Calvin then proceeds to argue that people possess two kinds of religious knowledge – a knowledge of God as Creator and a knowledge of God as Redeemer. God may be known as Creator by general and special revelation, whereas He is known as Redeemer only via special revelation.³³

It can be agreed that God is only knowable as he reveals himself, and that both special and general revelations are given by God, and are the only source of the knowledge of God. This is also a helpful distinction to see that special revelation deals with the question of redemption, while general revelation is that for which humans are accountable and failure to know general revelation is what necessitates redemption and special revelation.

However, Calvin seems to confuse the ideas "infinite," "eternal," and "unchangeable," ideas that all persons have, with the theistic God.

That there exists in the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity, we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead, the memory of which he constantly renews and occasionally enlarges, that all to a man, being aware that there is a God, and that he is their Maker, may be condemned by their own conscience when they neither worship him nor consecrate their lives to his service. Certainly, if there is any quarter where it may be supposed that God is unknown, the most likely for such an instance to exist is among the dullest tribes farthest removed from civilization. But, as a heathen tells us, there is no nation so barbarous, no race so brutish, as not to be imbued with the conviction that there is a God.³⁴

³³ Demarest, Bruce A. *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982. 51.

³⁴ Calvin, John. Tony Lane and Hilary Osborne, eds. *The Institutes of Christian Religion*. Abridged ed. Baker Academic, 1987. Book I, Chap III.

That humans do not know God appears to be due to the fall (according to Calvin). "But though experience testifies that a seed of religion is divinely sown in all, scarcely one in a hundred is found who cherishes it in his heart, and not one in whom it grows to maturity, so far is it from yielding fruit in its season. Moreover, while some lose themselves in superstitious observances, and others, of set purpose, wickedly revolt from God, the result is that, in regard to the true knowledge of him, all are so degenerate, that in no part of the world can genuine godliness be found."³⁵ All humans are corrupt and fail to know what they should, and this leads to sinful acts.

The problem is that it is one thing to have an idea, and another to believe that the idea is of something that exists. The way that Calvin describes the *sensus divinitatis* begs the question because it assumes that God implanted the *sensus divinitatis* whereas this is what must be proven. However, it also confuses the formal ideas of eternal, infinite, unchanging, with the theistic view of these which says that only God is eternal, infinite, and unchanging. It is true that all humans have the idea of the eternal, but not all humans agree that God is eternal. Some humans have the idea of God, but not all. Some of those who have the idea of God do not believe that this is an idea of an existing being. Calvin's view is insufficient to explain why we should apply the ideas of eternal, infinite, and unchanging to the theistic God. As such it does not provide a basis for inexcusability.

What this sense is that all humans have is ambiguous. "In Calvin's hands, this amounts to the claim that any minimally developed and psychologically healthy human being, inevitably and without having first to think about it, would trust, honor, and obey God."³⁶ But any student of religion knows that the term "God" is highly ambiguous. Which view of God should be accepted? It is far from obvious that the *sensus divinitatis* gives the theistic view of God, let alone the Christian view of God. What is required is an argument to establish this view of God as opposed to other views. Augustine distinguishes between gods and God, and between those who believe in God and yet continue to worship gods. He does not merely assert that all humans believe in God "deep down," but endeavors to offer arguments showing why the gods of Rome are worthless and not to be worshiped.

The doctrine of total depravity is not an excuse for unbelief. "For Calvin, this claim is partly about what each of us *would* believe, if we *weren't* damaged by sin, and partly about what each of us still *does* believe, in spite of sin."³⁷ This way of phrasing this doctrine

³⁵ Calvin, Book I, Chap IV.

³⁶ Talbot, Mark. "Is it Natural to Believe in God." *Faith and Philosophy* 6, no. Ap (1989): 155–171.155.

³⁷ Talbot, 157.

undermines the need for redemption. I am damaged and so I have an excuse. If I were not damaged I would know God. Instead, the doctrine of total depravity should be understood in connection with being inexcusable. What is so depraved about humans is that they are rational beings, and God's existence is clear to reason, and yet they do not believe this. Reason is not damaged or corrupted. The problem is that the fallen human does not want to use reason. For this there is no excuse.

Calvin's doctrine of the *sensus divinitatis* can be used to undermine inexcusability. Christians have used it to excuse themselves from needing to give proof for their position. This excusing of the self from the need to use reason and give proof can be viewed as part of the sin that needs redemption.

Reformed Epistemology

A final example of an attempt to avoid giving an argument is Reformed Epistemology. This view is held by contemporary philosophers like Alvin Plantinga and Kelly James Clark. Reformed Epistemology asserts that belief in God is a matter of warrant not proof. Its name (Reformed) should not mislead, as it makes many claims that are contrary to important aspects of the Reformed Tradition (especially as found in the Westminster Confession of Faith). But that aside, warrant is insufficient to establish the inexcusability of unbelief and therefore Reformed Epistemology fails as an attempt to avoid argumentation. It should not be a matter of surprise if some adherents of this view endorse inclusivism or pluralism and in so doing reject Historic Christian claims about the need for redemption (claims central to the Reformation).

Reformed Epistemology proceeds by comparing belief in God to other beliefs that persons are not commonly (socially) required to give proof for holding. These include beliefs in other minds or the external world. An analogy is drawn: one is warranted to believe in other minds, and one is warranted to believe in God. Warrant can be challenged by "defeaters," but if these defeaters are responded to and thus defeated, the person continues to be warranted.

Warrant is grounded in proper function. According to this view, when a person is properly functioning he/she comes to hold certain beliefs about the world, such as the belief in other minds. Similarly, this view holds that when a person is properly functioning he/she will come to believe in God. This belief is warranted because it is the proper function of the mind, just like the proper functioning of the eye is to see a table. Only when the eye is damaged does this fail to happen. The fall is just such damage, so that humans are not properly functioning and therefore do not believe in God. The only

way to begin properly functioning is for the Holy Spirit to work in the person's life and repair the damage. The person who has been thus repaired is warranted in their Christian belief and does not need to justify this to the unbeliever, who is still damaged and not properly functioning.

The most obvious problem is that this view simply begs the question. It is one thing to say that unbelief is due to damage, it is another to prove this. The way to prove this would be to show that belief is the only rational option, and that unbelief violates the laws of reason. This involves showing that all forms of non-theism are not rational options, the most obvious way being to show that they involve contradictions. Consider the way that Augustine proceeded against Roman polytheism, Greek materialism, and some of the problems in Platonism, discussed earlier. He sought to show how these are contradictory, but that belief in God the Creator is not. Theism makes very specific claims about God that would need to be thus supported: God is eternal, infinite, and unchanging, and God is also good and concerned about the creation (in contrast to the deistic view). Simply showing that there is a "higher power" or "transcendent other" is not sufficient to show that non-theism is rationally inexcusable. The Apostle Paul affirms this when he says that the nature of God can be known from general revelation (Romans 1:20).

Another problem is that Reformed Epistemology concedes that unbelievers can be warranted in their worldview. This provides an excuse for unbelief. And yet the Apostle Paul affirms that redemption is needed because there is no excuse (Romans 1), and Augustine also holds this kind of exclusivism. This is not simply a bald assertion on the part of Paul or Augustine, there is a relationship between needing to be forgiven and having done something that is inexcusable. Again, it is not surprising if at this point the Reformed Epistemologist becomes an inclusivist or pluralist. However, this just emphasizes the reality that Reformed Epistemology is not consistent with the exclusivism of Augustine³⁸ or Historic Christianity (including the Reformation), and is insufficient to establish the inexcusability of unbelief.

The externalist account of knowledge used by Reformed Epistemology is much different than the method of Augustine. While Augustine does sometimes use externalist language, especially in discussing the affects of the fall and redemption, he also offers an internalist account that addresses the question: why should I believe this? Each religion/worldview can offer its own externalist account of knowledge, making this approach ineffectual. What is needed is a way to know which externalist account to accept. This requires arguments

³⁸ *City of God*, XXI.12.

from the internalist perspective. He offers arguments about why competing worldviews of his day should not be accepted based on their being contradictory, and then concludes with Christian theism. This provides his audience with an argument explaining why they should accept the externalist account involved in discussion about the fall and redemption. Augustine's approach is much more robust than what is found in Reformed Epistemology.

Credo Ut Intelligam

A final issue worth addressing is the use of the phrase "Believe in order to understand, because unless you believe, you will not understand" by Augustine. Commonly stated in its Latin form, *credo ut intelligam*, this has become a motto for many Christians in their approach to apologetics and the ethics of belief. It will be shown here that Augustine's use of this phrase is not similar to Anselm's, and is in contrast to a phrase used by Tertullian. If broadly applied, *credo ut intelligam* appears to undermine the need for arguments to establish the clarity of God's existence.

If one must first believe in order to understand then it is not clear which religion/worldview one should believe to understand. The Roman polytheism or Greek materialist can reply to Augustine's arguments: you must first believe our position in order to understand it. If it is not clear which worldview to believe in order to understand (and every worldview can make this claim), then the failure to believe in God cannot be inexcusable (or vain and impious).

Furthermore, it is hard to understand what this phrase means. If you do not understand something then it is difficult to see how you could believe it. What is it that is being believed? One could believe anything by this standard, which the hope of understanding it later. It undermines the possibility of an ethics of belief.

Instead, it seems that the phrase should be: "I believe because I understand," or "understanding is believing." Consider how Augustine proceeds in the *City of God*. As a person comes to understand that the gods of Rome were ineffectual, one comes to place their belief in God the Creator. Or as one sees the absurdity of Greek materialism, or the absurdity of believing in eternal cycles or innumerable worlds, one comes to believe in God. This is the way that the understanding operates. *Credo ut intelligam* calls for blind belief (fideism), but Augustine does not approach God's existence in that manner.

This does not explain his use of the phrase. It occurs in one of his sermons in the context of a discussion about the Trinity. He does not apply it to all aspects of Christianity or all areas of belief. It seems to be a contrast with Tertullian's approach. Tertullian said: *credo quia absurdum est*, "I believe because it is absurd." This was

also a phrase about the Trinity. Where Tertullian is willing to believe in the absurd, Augustine was not. If he, like Tertullian, had been willing to accept absurdities, what would happen when he argued against the gods of Rome? After having shown that belief in the gods of Rome is absurd, he would then have to believe it himself or accept those who do. When Tertullian was discussed above, it was mentioned that he was himself a notable apologist who offered many arguments against opposing views. His claim about absurdity seems to be best understood as an affirmation of the strength of his belief. If taken literally and applied it would require that he accepts those worldviews he had argued were absurd.

Augustine's claim is that the Trinity is not an absurdity, and as one explores this doctrine one will come to understand it. One cannot understand an absurdity, it remains forever beyond comprehension. But according to Augustine, the doctrine of the Trinity is not like this. Believing in God the Creator, the divinity of the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit as sent by the Father and Son, one must believe in the Trinity. Greater understanding comes with time as this doctrine is studied. The formation of this doctrine in the Nicene Creed avoids contradiction and absurdity: One God, Three Persons (not One God and Three Gods, or One Person and Three Persons). Augustine is encouraging rational inquiry where Tertullian's phrase would shut it down. But Augustine's phrase is not applied to all areas of belief, but is based on having shown the clarity of God's existence and done intricate exegetical work in the Scriptures to support the doctrine of the Trinity. In this limited application he differs from Anselm, who is more famous in his use of *credo ut intelligam* and seems to have given it a broader application.

Conclusion

Augustine does offer some examples of a methodology that seeks to show the rational inexcusability of unbelief. But he also comes short in consistently applying this, and has therefore been used to justify coercion against persons who appear recalcitrant. He believed that it is clear that God exists, and gave arguments to show that alternative views are not possible. He especially focused on the inadequacy of the Roman gods, the Greek materialists, and those who believe in God but also worship other gods. Of special concern are the problem of evil, and his reconciliation of God's predestination, free will, and human responsibility. Attempts to avoid the need for arguments, by thinkers like Tertullian, John Calvin, and the Reformed Epistemologists, fail to uphold the clarity of God's existence and therefore cannot support the inexcusability of unbelief. Augustine's ethics of belief is a necessary presupposition to exclusivist claims by Christianity; if

Christ is necessary for redemption then the sin that needs redemption must be inexcusable. This sin begins with the failure to know God, the implication is that the failure to know God is inexcusable and it is clear that God exists. Augustine's work to show that it is inexcusable to hold to the alternative religions/worldviews of his day provides a model that can be utilized to address the challenges that have arisen since his time. Certainly there have been significant challenges to arguments for God's existence and the knowledge of God after Augustine. Augustine continues to contribute to this discussion by providing a method that serves as the basis for a robust approach to the clarity of God's existence. There is also a tension within Augustine that has come down to the present day which can only be relieved by critically examining the presuppositions that limited Augustine's analysis of unbelief as sin and therefore limited his ability to show the clarity of God's existence.

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