Literature Review

Analytic epistemology experienced a monumental resurgence in the latter part of the twentieth century. A short paper by Edmund Gettier launched a frenzied era of original research into the nature of some of our central epistemic concepts, e.g., knowledge, justification, rationality, belief, defeat, and evidence. The excitement of Gettier's challenge to the view that knowledge is justified true belief drew interest from a wide range of very talented philosophers. Formidable figures such as Fred Dretske, John Pollack, Robert Nozick, Roderick Chisholm, Alvin Goldman, Marshall Swain, David Armstrong, Alvin Plantinga, William Alston, Richard Swinburne, and Gilbert Harman, to name just a few, published widely on the foregoing epistemic concepts.

This outpouring of original research meant that new theoretical tools and insights became available for application in philosophy of religion. Religious epistemology, taking advantage of this resurgence in mainstream epistemology, experienced a new era of original research. William Alston, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Alvin Plantinga, and Richard Swinburne all played a particularly central role in this resurgence. Alston, in his popular book *Perceiving God*, argued that religious beliefs held by way of religious experience are just as justified as our regular or quotidian perceptual beliefs. In his masterpiece *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga, inspired by (i) the notion of a basic belief in the epistemic theory of foundationalism, (ii) his proper functioning account of warrant, and (iii) John Calvin's theology, defended the position that Christian beliefs are warranted if true. The broad outlines of his position came to be labeled "Reformed Epistemology." Wolterstorff, in his *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, provided an elegant and sophisticated account of the role religious belief play in an agent's overall epistemic "web" of beliefs. Lastly, Swinburne, drawing on the Bayesian apparatus, mounted, over the space of several books, a Bayesian defense of the rationality of several key Christian tenets, including a commitment to the existence of God.

Today epistemology continues to flourish. A new account of knowledge, the safety account, is now gaining traction and is in fierce competition with virtue accounts, where such accounts have been inspired by Aristotle's virtue ethics. Timothy Williamson is the central figure advocating for a safety condition for knowledge, whilst Ernest Sosa and Duncan Pritchard now defend an account of knowledge that purports to incorporate the insights of both the safety and virtue intuitions about knowledge. John Greco and Linda Zagzebski are prominent figures in the virtue literature. While Williamson's work on safety can be studied apart from his larger knowledge-first project, the iconoclastic positions he takes in his *Knowledge and its Limits*, now considered a contemporary classic, on the nature of mental states, evidence, justification, and the normative relations between knowledge and assertion and practical reasoning are receiving a significant amount of attention by a wide array of philosophers both within and outside of epistemology. Of particular interest is Williamson's aim to shift our focus away from justification towards knowledge as the key notion in our epistemology and by which other epistemic concepts, such as justification, should be illuminated. He argues, inter alia, that far from it being possible to understand the latter in terms of the former, we should rather undertake to understand the former in terms of the latter.

Today there are also a number of issues and themes that are either being introduced for the first time or being reconsidered but from a fresh perspective. Several noteworthy

examples come to mind. Formal epistemology, which takes on apparatus from the philosophy of science and decision theory, attempts to formalize epistemic concepts, properties, and relations. Contextualism and subject-sensitive invariantism have been out forward as potentially novel responses to radical skepticism. Both introduce factors—including pragmatic factors—into the determination of knowledge that had previously been thought irrelevant to the nature of knowledge. The nature of defeat is now, in light of formal epistemology and Williamson's work on the nature evidence and evidential probability, being re-examined with new areas of concern arising from higher-order evidence and its relationship to defeat and dogmatism. The epistemology of testimony has enjoyed its most prolific period since Hume and Reid clashed over the defacto status of testimony. This outpouring of scholarship was a direct result of the new material being developed in response to Gettier, testimony merely being another dominant source of knowledge. Finally, a growing number of scholars have begun to turn their attention to the epistemic implications of non-evidential factors in a belief's etiology, e.g., the correlation between one's place of birth and one's genetics with the content of one's beliefs. In addition, the honing of evolutionary theory by the sciences in the past few decades provided further evidence for the hypothesis that evolution played a role in some of our most fundamental moral and religious beliefs.

This document is divided into three broad sections. The first will provide a selective overview of the major currents in mainstream epistemology from Gettier onwards. The second section of the document will provide a selective overview of the state of the literature in religious epistemology with special attention allocated to the primary works of Alston and Plantinga and the secondary literature these works generated. A brief overview of some additional themes in religious epistemology concludes this section. The document concludes with a third section in which we reflect on the comparative state of the literature in mainstream epistemology and religious epistemology.

Section A: An Overview of Mainstream Epistemology

I)   Gettier and the Analysis of Knowledge and Justification (1963—Present)

Below are a select number of influential pieces that exemplify the type of research undertaken in response to Gettier's paper. Worth special mention is Shope's book which provides an excellent overview of all the various means by which philosophers tried to overcome the epistemic gap Gettier identified between knowledge and a justified true belief. Most of the pieces mentioned below spawned a massive secondary literature of their own, a literature far too large to catalogue here.

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2. Knowledge, Safety, and Methods

Keith DeRose has gone on record stating that Williamson's *Knowledge and its Limits* is the most important work to be published in epistemology since 1975. And Gilbert Harman, in his review of this work, states that it will "set the agenda for epistemology for this next decade and beyond." Today there are whole graduate seminars devoted to the ideas presented in this modern classic. Below are some noteworthy works on safety, in general, and *Knowledge and its Limits*, in particular.

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Section B: An Overview of Religious Epistemology

Religious epistemology is a subdiscipline that depends on mainstream epistemology to furnish it with new tools with which to study any relevant aspect of religion. Given the explosion of activity in mainstream epistemology from the 1960's onwards, it is no surprise to find similarly rich productivity within religious epistemology. Alston, Plantinga, Wolterstorff, and Swinburne all had previously published in mainstream journal before developing their groundbreaking accounts within religious epistemology. The works by Alston and Plantinga defending the epistemic credentials of religious belief on the back of an anti-evidentialist account of perception, dominated the literature. Such accounts themselves were the direct result of the rise of externalism in epistemology made popular, to a large extent, by the work of Alvin Goldman in the seventies. Both Alston and Plantinga produced accessible and formidable arguments in favor of either epistemic justification or warrant of religious belief. Below is a select number of relevant primary and secondary literature.

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2. Works by Alvin Plantinga

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Pasnau, Robert. 1993. "Justified Until Proven Guilty: Alston's New Epistemology." *Philosophical Studies*, 72(1), 1-33.

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Boyle, Joseph, J. 1988. "Is "God Exists" a Properly Basic Belief?: A Consideration of Alvin Plantinga's Argument." In *Thomist Papers* 4, ed. Leonard A. Kennedy. Houston, TX: Center for Thomistic Studies, 169-184.

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Williams, Clifford. 1994. "Kierkegaardian Suspicion and Properly Basic Beliefs." *Religious Studies* 30(3), 261-267.

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5. Other Themes is Religious Epistemology

While the works of Alston, Plantinga, Wolterstorff, and Swinburne absorbed much of the creative energy within religious epistemology, several themes worth mentioning took on a life of their own. Below is a sketch of some of this important literature.

i)   The Epistemology of Religious Pluralism

Adams, Robert. 1994. "Religious Disagreements and Doxastic Practices," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 4: 885-890.

Alston, W. 1997. "Response to Hick." *Faith and Philosophy* 14.3: 287-288.

Basinger, David. 1988. "Hick's Religious Pluralism and Reformed Epistemology: A Middle Ground? " *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (October): 421-432.

Feldman, Richard. 2007. "Reasonable Religious Disagreements," in L. Antony (ed.), *Philosophers without God: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life* , Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hick, John. 1997. "The Possibility of Religious Pluralism: A Reply to Gavin D'Costa." *Religious Studies* 33 (2):161-166.

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Kraft, James. 2007. 'Religious disagreement, externalism, and the epistemology of disagreement: listening to our grandmothers,' *Religious Studies*, 43: 417–432.

Mawson, T. 2005. "Byrne's' Religious Pluralism" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 58.

Plantinga, A. 1997. "Ad Hick." *Faith and Philosophy* 14.30: 295-98.

Quinn, Philip L. 1995. "Towards Thinner Theologies: Hick and Alston on Religious Diversity." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*. 38(1-3), 145-164,

Runzo, Joseph. 1995. "Perceiving God, Worldviews, and Faith: Meeting the Problem of Religious Pluralism." In *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith*, ed. Thomas Senor. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Schellenberg, J L. 1994. "Religious Experience and the Religious Diversity: A Reply to Alston." *Religious Studies*, 30(2), 151-159.

ii)   The Evolutionary Challenge to Religious Belief

In recent years the perennial question of science vs. religion has taken on a particular shape; namely, evolutionary accounts of the origins of religious beliefs that have been put forward by several scientists have been used by some to formulate a new challenge to the epistemic status of religious beliefs. This literature has a counterpart in the evolutionary challenge to moral beliefs. A selection of this relatively new literature follows.

Atran, S. 2002. *In gods we trust*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Atran, S., & Norenzyan, A. 2004. "Religion's evolutionary landscape: Counterintuition, commitment, compassion, communion." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 27*, 713–770.

Barrett, J. L. 2004. *Why would anyone believe in God?*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

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Bloom, P. 2005. "Is God an accident?" *The Atlantic Monthly* (December).

Boyer, P. 2001. *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*. NY: Basic Books.

Bulbulia, J. 2007. "Evolution of religion." In R. I. Dunbar & L. Barrett (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of evolutionary psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

--------------. 2009. "Religiosity as mental time-travel: Cognitive adaptations for religious behavior." In J. Schloss & M.J. Murray *The believing primate* (pp. 44–75). New York: Oxford University Press.

Clark, K. & Barrett, J. 2010. "Reformed Epistemology and the Cognitive Science of Religion." *Faith and Philosophy* 28 (2), pp. 174-189.

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Henig, R. M. 2007. Darwin's God. *The New York Times* (March 4).

Huemer, M. 2001. *Skepticism and the veil of perception*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Johnson, D., & Bering, J. 2009. "Hand of God, mind of man: Punishment and cognition in the evolution of cooperation." In J. Schloss & M.J. Murray *The believing primate* (pp. 26–43). New York: Oxford University Press.

Murray, M. J. 2009. "Scientific explanations of religion and the justification of religious belief." In J. Schloss & M.J. Murray *The believing primate* (pp. 168–178). New York: Oxford University Press.

Norenzyan, A. 2010. "Why we believe: Religion as a human universal." In H. Hogh-Oleson (Ed.), *Human morality and sociality: Evolutionary and comparative perspectives* (pp. 58–71). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ruse, M. 2007. "The sociobiological account of religious belief. In C. Meister & P. Copan (Eds.), *Routledge companion to philosophy of religion*. London: Routledge.

Schloss, J. & Murray, M. 2009. *The Believing Primate.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thurow, J. 2011. "Does Cognitive Science Show Belief in God to be Irrational? The Epistemic Consequences of the Cognitive Science of Religion." *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion.*

Wilson, D. S. 2002. *Darwin's cathedral*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

---------------. 2005. "Testing major evolutionary hypotheses about religion with a random sample." *Human Nature, 16*(4), 419–446.

iii)   The Epistemology of Skeptical Theism

In the very long history of philosophy of religion, no question has received as much attention as the problem of evil: How could an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God permit so much evil? In the past the existence of evil was typically taken to be logically incompatible with the existence of God. However, towards the end of the twentieth century, work began in earnest on the evidential problem of evil (in large part owing to the work of William Rowe). One defense of theism took on a particularly epistemic form—skeptical theism (a view that is so called owing to its emphasis on our ignorance of divine intentions and plans). Below are some noteworthy publications.

Almeida, M. & Oppy, G. 2003. "Sceptical Theism and Evidential Arguments from Evil," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 81:4, pp. 496-516.

Alston, W. 1991. "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5, pp. 29-67.

Bergmann, M. 2001. "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil," *Nous* 35, pp. 278-296.

Draper, P. 1989. "Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists," *Nous* 23, pp. 331-350.

Dougherty, T. 2008. "Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism," *Faith & Philosophy* 25, pp. 172-176.

Hasker, W. 2004. "The sceptical solution to the problem of evil," in Hasker, W. *Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God* (Routledge) pp. 43-57.

Hick, J. 1966. *Evil and the God of Love* (Harper & Rowe).

Howard-Snyder, D. 2010. "Epistemic Humility, Arguments from Evil, and Moral Skepticism," in Kvanvig, J. (ed.) *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) pp. 17-57.

Jordan, J. 2006. "Does Skeptical Theism Lead to Moral Skepticism?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 72, pp. 403-416.

McBrayer, J. 2009. "CORNEA and Inductive Evidence," *Faith & Philosophy* 26:1, pp. 77-86.

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Plantinga, A. 1974. *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Eerdmans).

Rowe, W. 1979. "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, pp. 335-41.

------------. 2001. "Skeptical Theism: A Response to Bergmann," *Nous* 35, pp. 297-303.

Sennett, J. 1993. "The Inscrutable Evil Defense against the Inductive Argument from Evil," *Faith & Philosophy* 10, pp. 220-229.

Tooley, M. 1991. "The Argument from Evil," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5, pp. 89-134.

Trakakis, N. 2003. "Evil and the complexity of history: a response to Durston," *Religious Studies* 39, pp. 451-458.

Van Inwagen, P. 2003. *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford University Press).

Wilks, I. 2009. "Skeptical Theism and Empirical Unfalsifiability," *Faith & Philosophy* 26:1, pp. 64-76.

Wykstra, S. 1984. "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'," *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 16, pp. 73-93.

iv) General Religious Epistemology

In addition to the foregoing themes, several traditional themes continued to be addressed in the literature, e.g., epistemic issues related to faith vs. reason, miracles, Wittgenstein's religious epistemology, and William James's pragmatism.

Audi. R. 2008. "Belief, Faith, and Acceptance." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 63: 87-102.

------------. Forthcoming. *Rationality and Religious Commitment.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Beckwith, Francis J. 1991. "Hume's Evidential/Testimonial Epistemology, Probability, and Miracles." *Logos* (USA) 12: 87-104.

Bishop, J. 2007. *Believing by Faith. An Essay in the Epistemology and Ethics of Religious Belief.* Clarendon Press: Oxford.

Lara Buchak (forthcoming). "Can It Be Rational to Have Faith?" In Jacob Chandler & Victoria Harrison (eds.), *Probability in the Philosophy of Religion.* Oxford University Press.

Clark, Kelly James. 1990. *Return to Reason: A Critique of Enlightenment Evidentialism and a Defense of Reason and Belief in God.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Clark, K. J. & VanArragon, R. 2011. *Evidence and Religious Belief.* Oxford University Press.

Dole, A. & Chignell, A. (eds.). 2005. *God and the Ethics of Belief: New Essays in Philosophy of Religion.* Cambridge University Press

Evans, C. Stephen and Merold Westphal, eds. 1993. *Christian Perspectives on Religious Knowledge*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Geivett, R. & Sweetman, R. 1992. *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kenny, Anthony. 1992. *What is Faith? Essays in the Philosophy of Religion.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Mawson, T. 2007. "Praying for Known Outcomes" *Religious Studies*, 43.

Murray, Michael, ed. 1999. *Reason for the Hope Within*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Phillips, D. Z. 1992. 'Faith, Skepticism, and Religious Understanding', in Geivett and Sweetman 1992, 81–91; reprinted from D. Z. Phillips 1970. *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Plantinga, Alvin, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds. 1983. *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press

Pritchard, Duncan. 2000. "Is `God Exists' a `Hinge Proposition' of Religious Belief?" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 47 (3):129-140.

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Section C: Reflections on the Literature

Owing in large part to Alston and Plantinga, religious epistemology has experienced a fertile period of intense activity since the latter part of the twentieth century. However, in recent years the number of publications on issues related to their works has started to dry up. This is the nature of scholarship—the popularity of certain ideas wax and wane as new ideas surface to compete for attention. As is evident from the literature review provided in Section B, there is now a significant array of new ideas and tools available for religious epistemologists to avail themselves of for the purposes of mining the epistemic aspects of religion, to reach new insights, and to refine previous work on traditional questions. Some limited infiltration of these new ideas has already begun. Worth special mention in this respect is Robert Audi who maintains a respectable presence in both mainstream epistemology and religious epistemology. And Michael Murray, Kelly Clark, and Justin Barrett have been central in the defense of religious belief against evolutionary challenges. *The Believing Primate* is now required reading for anyone interested in this topic. Below are a select number of publications that demonstrate the emergence of new ideas in religious epistemology as a result of some of the new ideas generated by mainstream epistemology.

Tim Mawson (2009) "Mill's Argument Against Religious Knowledge." *Religious Studies*, 45.

In this piece Mawson discusses the epistemic upshot of one of the etiological challenges mentioned in Section B(6); namely, the "problem of contingency" which raises epistemic questions concerning the correlation between the content of one's religious beliefs and the place of one's birth. Mawson makes use of a short quote from John Stuart Mill's famous work *On Liberty* where Mill brings up for discussion the correlation between religious belief and place of birth, as a means of engaging this etiological challenge to the epistemic status of religious beliefs, which, roughly stated, amounts to the following: What are we to make of the epistemic status of religious beliefs in light of the fact that there is a very high statistical correlation between the place in which one is born and brought up, on the one hand, and the content of one's religious beliefs and commitments, on the other?

Aaron Rizzieri 2011. "Pragmatic encroachment, stakes, and religious knowledge." *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion.*

In this piece the author discusses the implications for knowledge of particular Christian claims in light of the literature on pragmatic factors in knowledge attributions mentioned in Section B(1) above. This work is particularly interesting in virtue of Rizzieri's use of subject-sensitive invariantism to put a new spin on David Hume's challenge to the legitimacy of testimony about miracles. Given the importance that miracles have played in the history and development of religions, pragmatic encroachment opens new ways of formulating and meeting Hume's challenge.

Kelly Clark & Dani Rabinowitz 2011. "Knowledge and the Objection to Religious Belief from Cognitive Science." *European Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 3: 67-83.

Whilst the epistemic challenge of evolutionary psychology to religious beliefs has received attention in the literature (see 5(ii) above), this article is the first to engage with this challenge from the perspective of Williamson's knowledge-first epistemology. In particular, stress is placed on a safety condition for knowledge and the dynamics of method individuation central to the safety condition. The article concludes with an argument defending the epistemic status of religious beliefs that rests on recent work done by Jennifer Lackey on the epistemology of testimony.