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THERE IS NO *SENSUS DIVINITATIS*

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Abstract: Inspired by Alvin Plantinga, many philosophers of religion accept the existence of a *sensus divinitatis*, a cognitive mechanism that produces religious beliefs. In this paper I will argue that there are no good reasons to accept the existence of a *sensus divinitatis* and hence its existence should not be affirmed. Plantinga gives two arguments for its existence, one empirical and one from the nature of God. I will argue that the first argument fails because God's nature makes it more likely that he lets himself be known through other means. In order to criticize the second argument I rely on recent empirical data on religious cognition and argue that it does not lend support to accepting the existence of a *sensus divinitatis* or a similar cognitive mechanism.

Key Words: Reformed Epistemology, Alvin Plantinga, *Sensus Divinitatis*, Cognitive Science of Religion.

Introduction

The thesis of the *sensus divinitatis*, a cognitive mechanism responsible for theistic beliefs, received its most prominent recent defense by Alvin Plantinga in his ‘reformed epistemology’¹. Today many philosophers of religion assume its existence in discussions over religious epistemology. In this paper I will argue that there are no good reasons to accept the existence of the *sensus divinitatis* or a similar cognitive mechanism and hence its existence should not be affirmed. I will argue against the *sensus divinitatis* as follows: In section 2 I will discuss Plantinga’s arguments in favor of the *sensus divinitatis*. I will distinguish two, one empirical argument and one from the nature of God. In section 3 I criticize the second argument and in section 4 the first. I conclude that there are no good reasons to accept the *sensus divinitatis*’ existence and that its existence should not be affirmed.

Plantinga’s defense of the *sensus divinitatis*

Alvin Plantinga invokes the *sensus divinitatis* to defend the rationality of religious belief. Following up on a suggestion made by Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin, Plantinga argued that God could have implanted a *sensus divinitatis* in humans to let himself be known. The idea probably goes back to a passage in Paul’s letter to the Romans where he writes:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.
Romans 1: 18-20 (NASV)

Plantinga first used the term in *Warranted Christian Belief*, but already hinted at something similar in two earlier articles³. In this section, I will not discuss Plantinga’s rational status of religious belief, but merely discuss his arguments for the existence of the *sensus divinitatis*. The idea of the *sensus* goes back at least to Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin. Variants of Plantinga’s account were also defended by others⁴. In this paper, I will focus on Plantinga’s version because his account is very influential in recent religious epistemology.

Plantinga defines the *sensus divinitatis* as: “a natural, inborn sense of God, or of divinity, that is the origin and source of the world’s religions”⁵.

Plantinga claims that the *sensus divinitatis* should be thought of as a disposition or set of dispositions that can be triggered under a wide array of very different circumstances, ranging from the beauty of the night sky to a feeling of guilt. The *sensus* is thus something like an input-output device, taking the circumstances as input and delivering theistic beliefs as output, rather independent of what the input is⁶.

Plantinga does not really give a clearly fleshed out argument why he thinks such a cognitive mechanism exists. His reasons for thinking so can be discerned from his comments on the matter. He writes:

“I think that there is a kind of faculty or a cognitive mechanism, what Calvin calls a *sensus divinitatis* or sense of divinity, which in a wide variety of circumstances produces in us beliefs about God. These circumstances (...) trigger the disposition to form the beliefs in question (...). Under these circumstances we develop or form theistic beliefs – or, rather, these beliefs are formed in us (...).”⁷

Here Plantinga appears to make an empirical claim, namely that theistic beliefs are formed in a particular way and this way resembles the workings of a cognitive mechanism like the *sensus divinitatis*.

Plantinga gives another argument derived from the nature of God. He writes: “Given that God would certainly *want* us to be able to know him, the chances are excellent that he would create us with faculties enabling us to do just that.”⁸ Plantinga thus claims that God wants to let himself be known to people and therefore he will likely implant a *sensus divinitatis*. Plantinga also suggests this follows from God’s goodness. He writes:

“If it is true (...) there is (...) such a person as God (...) who loves us, who desires that we know and love him, and who is such that it is our end and good to know and love him. (...) [T]hen he would of course intend that we be able to be aware of his presence and to know something about him.”⁹

Both of Plantinga’s arguments appear to be conditional since they are dependent on God’s existence. Plantinga’s argument is that if God exists, He likely created humans with a cognitive mechanism by means of which He lets himself be known¹⁰. Plantinga’s other writings make it abundantly clear that he affirms the conditional; he argued that Christians can take belief in God’s existence as properly basic¹¹, and also defended arguments in favor of God’s existence¹². If Plantinga affirms God’s existence, we can infer that he also affirms the existence of a cognitive mechanism by means of which he lets Himself be known, i.e. the *sensus divinitatis*, although he does not do this explicitly.

Plantinga's first argument

Plantinga argues that if God exists he will likely want to let himself be known and will likely do this by means of a cognitive mechanism like the *sensus divinitatis*. In this section I will dispute the claim that God, if he exists, will want to let himself be known in this way. The claim consists of two claims; namely that God will want to let himself be known and that he will want this by means of a *sensus divinitatis*. The first part clearly does not hold for all gods. We can think of gods that will not want, or cannot, to let themselves be known, for example the god of deism. The majority of gods (if not all) worshipped by people of all world religions, will want this. Furthermore, there can be little doubt that the Christian God (which is the god Plantinga discusses) will want himself to be known if he exists. I will criticize the last part of Plantinga's claim and argue that it is not likely that God will let himself be known by a mechanism like the *sensus divinitatis*.

Now, does God need a special cognitive mechanism like the *sensus divinitatis* to let Himself be known? Obviously he does not. Plantinga's own writings provide us with ample reasons to doubt the former claim. Plantinga discusses at length another way how God can let Himself be known, namely by means of the Holy Spirit¹³. Roughly stated, The Holy Spirit can dwell in humans resulting in full-blown Christian belief. Plantinga acknowledges that the working of the Holy Spirit is usually accompanied by reading Scripture and testimony and since these are not always available God might also need a *sensus divinitatis* to let Himself be known. Many people lack access to scripture and relevant testimony and without a *sensus divinitatis* God could not let Himself be known to them. Therefore, it does not seem as if Plantinga claims that God always needs a *sensus divinitatis*, but in many cases it is the best (or only) way.

Plantinga claims thus that God will likely use the *sensus divinitatis* to let himself be known. Now, what speaks in favor of this claim? In order to argue against this claim, I will contrast Plantinga's account with another influential account of religious epistemology where God is argued to let himself be known without a special cognitive mechanism, namely William Alston's account. I will first give an outline of Alston's account, then show how it is different from Plantinga's and finally argue why it appears to be a likelier way for God to let Himself be known. From this I conclude that God is not likely to use a cognitive mechanism like the *sensus* to let himself be known.

Alston argued for the rationality of theistic beliefs by claiming that they are formed by a reliable doxastic practice¹⁴. In Alston's view, religious cognition involves perception of God. He writes: "[o]ur working criterion for mystical perception [Alston's term for perception of God] is that the experience is, or would be, taken by the subject to be an awareness of God."¹⁵ Religious cognition involves perceptions of God like cognition of

trees involves perception of trees. Elsewhere Alston argued for direct awareness of perceived objects. The awareness is unmediated by concepts. A subject is simply aware of the perceived thing¹⁶. The big difference between Alston's and Plantinga's approach lies in the fact that the former puts a lot more importance on input and the latter on the processing involved in religious cognition. Plantinga presents the *sensus divinitatis* as a disposition or set of dispositions to form theistic beliefs in various circumstances but these circumstances need not involve a direct awareness. Alston himself claimed that Plantinga discussed a wider range of theistic beliefs than those resulting from perceptions of God. He writes:

“There [when having perceptions of God] the subject has something quite explicit to go on, something she can ‘point to’, namely the putative direct representation of God to her experience as so-and-so. But in the Plantingian cases that are not of this sort, what we have is simply a strong tendency to form a certain belief in certain circumstances without any capacity to specify anything (...) that is intuitively plausible to take as a basis.”¹⁷

Plantinga writes in response to Alston:

“(...) I think it is clear that in some of the experiences that are on the model, operations of the *sensus divinitatis*, there is a sense of God's actually being presented to, present to, one's awareness, but in others not. (...) In (...) cases of this sort (...) God doesn't seem exactly *present*, or *presented* even though various beliefs about him (...) arise.”¹⁸

Clearly for Alston the question whether theistic beliefs arise when God is actually present to the subject's awareness is of much greater importance than it is for Plantinga. According to Alston, Plantinga's view of religious cognition is an internal one¹⁹. To this we can add that Alston's view is rather an external one; ‘external’ because the focus is on external input and not so much on internal processing.

Because of his emphasis on the external input in Alston model God has no need for a special cognitive mechanism to let himself be known. His account is thus more economical than Plantinga's account. Since his account does not rely on familiarity with Scripture or relevant testimony, Alston has made clear that God can let Himself be known in many cases where the subject is unaware of Scripture or relevant testimony as well.

Alston's account is also a likelier account than Plantinga's because genuine perceptions of God are preferable to a cognitive mechanism

producing theistic beliefs without God being present to the awareness. With perceptions of God there is a more immediate causal link between the belief and what is perceived; with the *sensus divinitatis* the link is much more indirect. As a result it is harder to distinguish outputs of the *sensus divinitatis* from hallucinatory beliefs where there also is no immediate causal link (or no causal link at all) between perception and belief. It seems unlikely that a God who wants to let himself be known to humans would do this in a way that resembles how hallucinatory beliefs are produced. If he did this, he would give humans reasons to mistrust their theistic beliefs.

Furthermore, a God who lets Himself be known through experiences where he is not present to the awareness can be considered deceptive and this conflicts with God's omni-benevolence. Plantinga explicitly included 'a feeling of divine presence' among the beliefs that can be produced by the *sensus divinitatis*. If God is indeed not present to the awareness of a subject when this belief is produced, God is deceiving the subject.

There can of course be additional reasons for claiming that a *sensus divinitatis* is a better mean for God to let Himself be known. One possible reason is that genuine perceptions of God are not possible. Herman Philipse argued that perceptual experiences of God are impossible because God is believed to be radically transcendent to the universe. We might at best perceive the effects he allegedly produced²⁰. The effects God allegedly produced do not immediately testify to God's existence let alone justify it and thus, if Philipse is right, justification of theistic beliefs would require a special cognitive mechanism implanted in humans. Plantinga explicitly rejects this position and even refers to Alston's work when he writes: "I believe William Alston has shown that if there is such a person as God, there could certainly be perceptions of him."²¹ Most religious traditions and most philosophers of religion share Alston's and Plantinga's view on this, thus Philipse's objection does not give good reasons for accepting the existence of a *sensus divinitatis*.

Another reason why a *sensus divinitatis* could be a better way for God to let himself be known is because it excludes luck in the formation of theistic beliefs. Plantinga could argue that by implanting a *sensus divinitatis* in every human, God could assure that everyone has at least the chance to know God because the *sensus* will produce theistic beliefs at some point during her life. This is also what Paul hinted at in Romans 1: 18-20. Because some understanding of God is inescapable, people are without excuse. Perceptions of God would not give the same assurance. Some people claim to have never had a perception of God. Some have even used the lack of religious experiences as an argument against the existence of God²². However, Plantinga's account of the *sensus divinitatis* does not exclude all luck in the formation of theistic beliefs. On his account, the *sensus* is triggered by circumstances and some people might never find themselves in those circumstances. Furthermore hinging theistic belief on

perceptions of God does not have to lead to luck being involved. It is probably right that not everyone experiences awareness of God but probably everyone (or nearly everyone) hears testimony of someone who did. Testimony can suffice to form theistic beliefs.

Plantinga might also be motivated to postulate a *sensus divinitatis* by the idea that religious cognition is very different from other forms of cognition and argue that the wide variety of circumstances that yield theistic beliefs makes it unlikely that they result from genuine perceptions of God. Many of Plantinga's examples of circumstances leading to religious beliefs do not seem to involve God being present to the subject's awareness, like feelings of being a sinner or awe at the beauty of nature²³. However, these examples do not force the conclusion that Alston's account or a similar one is incomplete and that a *sensus divinitatis* should be postulated. It does not because Alston suggests that God can also be perceived indirectly. He writes: "If (...) we can understand what it is for God to be directly present to one's awareness, why shouldn't something that is phenomenologically just like that happen by way of one's direct awareness of something in creation?"²⁴ Alston does not elaborate on his suggestion any further yet he suggests that perceiving God indirectly (i.e. mediated by something in creation) does not mean that God is not present to the subject's awareness. In many religions (and especially in Christianity) God is believed to be omnipresent. Thus God is also in some way present during indirect perceptions. Similarly, people often form beliefs about other people's mental states after perceiving symbolic actions like a gentle tug on a sleeve²⁵ or a threatening glance. The other person's mental state is somehow present to the subject's awareness but is only perceived through the symbolic action. Indirect perception of God can be thought in a similar way. Cognition is then still not an internal matter but requires external input of God being present to the senses. Not all of Plantinga's circumstances are covered yet. Circumstances that only relate to someone inner states, like feelings of being a sinner, still escape Alston's account. A plausible response is that examples of this sort are not circumstances where cognition takes place but rather preparatory or clearing the way for cognition. For example, in Christianity recognizing one's sins is believed to open the way for an encounter with God. The inner states are thus not perceptions of God in themselves but pave the way for perceptions of God.

Plantinga's second argument

Plantinga's second argument for the existence of the *sensus divinitatis* is an empirical one stating that a description of religious cognition, as experienced by believers, closely resembles the workings of a *sensus divinitatis*. To assess this claim we will take a closer look at recent

empirical data on religious cognition. Most recent scientific discussion of religious cognition was done by cognitive scientists of religion so I will focus on their theories.

Plantinga's work preceded most of the theories to which I will refer in this section. Kelly James Clark and Justin Barrett recently offered a new defense of Plantinga's empirical claim where they do take some of these theories into account. They also focused on theories from cognitive science of religion (CSR) and ambitiously claimed that cognitive science and reformed epistemology have remarkably converged on belief in God. The convergence would lie in the idea that belief in God is non-inferentially and automatically produced by a cognitive faculty²⁶.

An initial problem for Clark and Barrett's claim is that CSR is a young discipline (1990's onwards) and no theory is generally accepted. Jonathan Jong, Aku Visala and Christopher Kavanagh noted: "CSR has yet to fully deliver on its promises (...). CSR's theories are still *massively* underdetermined by data."²⁷ Clark and Barrett's (and Plantinga's) claim can, however, still be interpreted as a provisional claim. They could claim that the best current empirical description of religious cognition resembles the workings of a *sensus divinitatis*. In this section I will investigate this claim.

The most discussed and influential theories in the field are Justin Barrett's hyperactive agency detection device and related modular theories, Pascal Boyer's minimally counterintuitive concepts and theories connecting religious belief to social beliefs. I will discuss each of them in greater detail and examine whether they speak in favor of a *sensus divinitatis* or comparable cognitive mechanism that produces theistic belief. I do not mean to investigate whether scientific theories can be used to provide justification for religious belief or undermine it; I merely want to look if the description of religious cognition these theories give matches Plantinga's account of the *sensus divinitatis*.

Overly active cognitive modularities

Most CSR-theorists hold that there is no distinct mechanism producing religious beliefs but that religious beliefs piggyback on other 'ordinary' cognitive mechanisms. Very often religious beliefs are presented as results of overactivation of 'ordinary' mechanisms. In the wake of Jerry Fodor's *Modularity of Mind*²⁸ cognitive mechanisms are called modules or modularities. One of the best-known theories of this kind is Justin Barrett's hyperactive agency detection device. Barrett suggests that people might acquire their beliefs in gods, ghosts or spirits because the modularity by means of which they detect agents is prone to hyperactivity; it detects agents where none are present. For this reason, people are inclined to interpret the rustling of leaves as caused by an animal or fellow human being rather than caused by the wind.

Hyperactivity might have been selected for because it was safer for our ancestors to detect too many predators than too little. Similarly, upon hearing a noise or seeing movement where no agent is to be seen, the human mind might jump to the conclusion that an invisible agent caused it²⁹. Other theories attributed religious beliefs to overactivation of other cognitive modules. According to some the relevant module is the theory of mind³⁰, according to Kurt Gray overactivation of the moral dyad lead to belief in an ultimate moral agent or God³¹, and according to Pehr Granqvist and Lee Kirkpatrick emotional attachment is the mechanism doing the overshooting³².

Which cognitive module is overly active is of minor importance for our discussion. The question is whether the idea of religious beliefs resulting from overactivation of a cognitive mechanism, whose main function has nothing to do with religion, speaks in favor of postulating a *sensus divinitatis*. Kelly James Clark and Justin Barrett, who refer to theories of this kind as ‘Attribution Accounts’, write: “If a version of the Attribution Account proves to be most accurate, we appear to have a *sensus divinitatis* that, in terms of input conditions, looks more like Plantinga’s experientially-triggered faculty.”³³ The theories discussed above fit well with the idea that religious beliefs are produced internally rather than received externally. There are, however, some problems.

A first problem with Clark and Barrett’s claim is that none of the theories invoking overly active modularities resemble Plantinga’s account of the *sensus divinitatis* where a wide variety of circumstances can give rise to theistic beliefs. Plantinga’s *sensus divinitatis* is a cognitive mechanism that gets triggered by very diverse input whereas all theories discussed above consider religious beliefs as resulting from very limited kinds of input. For Barrett, the input is confined to vague feelings of the presence of agents; for Bering, belief in God is closely connected to social cognition about other mental states; for Gray, only moral input leads to belief in God; and for Granqvist and Kirkpatrick only feelings of emotional attachment foster religious belief. The limited number of circumstances that trigger religious beliefs in each theory does not resemble Plantinga’s description where the *sensus* can be triggered by circumstances ranging from the beauty of the night sky to feelings of being a sinner. Therefore these theories do not seem to support Plantinga’s reformed epistemology.

This problem might be mended if a combination of these theories was a more plausible explanation of religious cognition. In this case the circumstances triggering religious beliefs would still be (a lot) more limited than on Plantinga’s account. Furthermore Clark and Barrett’s view faces the problem that no CSR-theorist accepts a distinct cognitive mechanism for religious beliefs and that is what Plantinga’s *sensus divinitatis* undeniably has to be. They instead consider religious beliefs to be by-products of ‘ordinary’ cognitive mechanisms, like the theory of mind or mechanisms responsible for attaching to care-givers.

A bigger problem Clark and Barrett fail to account for is the naturalistic context in which most CSR-theories are proposed. The shared idea that religion results from overshooting of other cognitive mechanisms is never argued for but assumed. Without naturalistic assumptions this shared idea seems unwarranted. The ordinary mechanisms that are believed to overreact are not mechanisms which are triggered to produce beliefs but rather mechanisms which receive input and represent it to the mind. They do not so much produce, but transmit beliefs. Justin Barrett's agency detection device usually receives its input from actual agents in the world; beliefs formed by the theory of mind mostly result after contact with human minds; and beliefs about moral agents or emotional attachment figures usually also require an actual moral agent or attachment figure being present to a subject's awareness. When the outputs are religious beliefs, the mechanism does a whole lot more than merely transmitting or representing the received input to the mind and produces beliefs standing in a relatively independent relation to the input. The fact the CSR-theorists do not argue why religious cognition is different from all the others signals naturalistic presuppositions. If no reasons are given why religious beliefs are not representing received input, it appears that CSR-theorists presuppose that there is no such input which could be adequately represented as religious beliefs. This can only be the case if there are no gods or supernatural beings that could provide the required input (or if they are unwilling or unable to interact with humans) and this is fatal for Plantinga's account of religious epistemology. Without a naturalistic background there is no reason to accept that religious beliefs must be produced by overly active cognitive mechanisms and thus no reason to accept an internal account of religious cognition; with a naturalistic background there is a reason to accept an internal account but it surely was not implanted by a divine being. Since Plantinga's account cannot hinge on a naturalistic background, he cannot take this route.

Religious concepts as minimally counterintuitive concepts

A different approach is taken on by Pascal Boyer. Boyer noticed that humans are not willing to accept just any religious concept but are rather "choosy". He claims that humans have innate categorical templates like 'person' or 'animal'.³⁴ These templates have an inferential potential; for example, assigning the template 'person' predicts that the entity will have feelings, emotions and ideas. Religious concepts are special in this regard because they violate certain categorical assumptions; for example a ghost has most of the properties of a 'person' but violates the property that persons generally cannot move through walls. Religious concepts breach some of the relevant inferences of one category and can allow for the transfer of expectations associated with another category. As a result

religious concepts are counter-intuitive. However, in order to be viable³⁵, religious concepts cannot be too counterintuitive but may violate only a minimal amount of categorical expectations while the inferences that are not explicitly barred are preserved. The whole process usually remains unconscious³⁶. It should be noted that not all minimally counterintuitive concepts are religious concepts. For example, Justin Barrett gives the example of a flesh eating plant; it violates the expectation that entities in the category 'plant' do not eat like animals do, yet no one will claim that flesh eating plants are religious concepts³⁷. Boyer acknowledges this and states that religious concepts are a special form of minimally counterintuitive concepts. A person who can pass through walls is a more extreme example of a minimally counterintuitive concept than a flesh eating plant³⁸. However, adding extremity is still not enough to isolate religious concepts because Santa Clause, the Loch Ness monster and the Bogeyman could still be counted among them, although they are also hardly considered religious by anybody³⁹. In Boyer's view religious concepts matter more because of their association with morality⁴⁰.

According to Clark and Barrett, Boyer's account of religious cognition resembles Plantinga's account because in both no special experiences are needed to trigger belief. The predispositions towards minimally counterintuitive concepts also matches well with the vague outputs of the *sensus divinitatis*⁴¹. Again Clark and Barrett's conclusions are hasty. Boyer says very little about the role of experiences. His account is above all an account of the internal architecture of the human mind and he has little to say about external output. He does write the following: "(...) [B]uilding religious concepts requires mental systems and capacities that are there anyway, religious concepts or not."⁴² This passage suggests that the internal architecture of the human mind is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for having (or believing in) religious concepts. Boyer continues: "(...) [W]e can explain how people play music, paint pictures and learn to read by examining how mental capacities are recruited by these activities."⁴³ In order to play music, paint pictures and learn to read, external input is necessary to trigger the relevant mental capacities. Not just any triggering will do; playing music will require musical stimuli, painting pictures visual stimuli and learning to read semantic stimuli. Applied to religion, it is likely that religious capacities will only be triggered by religious stimuli. If this is true, special experiences are needed to trigger belief and Clark and Barrett's claim is false. Moreover, if special experiences are required to acquire religious concepts, Boyer's account speaks against Plantinga's account of the *sensus divinitatis*. Then the religious beliefs do not appear to result from a cognitive mechanism that can be triggered by a wide range of circumstances but appear to be just representations of those special experiences. This resembles Alston's account more closely.

Mind perception

Jesse Bering and Robert McCauley share the idea that humans form beliefs about supernatural beings in a similar way as they form beliefs about other minds⁴⁴. We noted that it is not clear that beliefs about supernatural beings stem from overactivation of the mechanisms involved in social cognition. Other CSR-theories do not discuss overactivation but retain the close connection between social and religious cognition. The motivation is that the objects of religious cognition, gods and other supernatural beings, are believed to be similar to human intentional agents. Will Gervais writes: “(...) the gods of most religions tend to be described and represented as intentional social agents with whom believers can interact.” and concludes: “that supernatural agent beliefs actually are directly derived byproducts from ordinary social cognition.”⁴⁵

Before the advent of CSR, none other than Alvin Plantinga himself pointed to a parallel between social and religious cognition as well, and concluded that both beliefs about other minds and theistic beliefs are equally rational to hold⁴⁶. CSR-theorists are, however, not very concerned with justification but with describing religious cognition. Our question is again if these theories speak in favor of a *sensus divinitatis*. If religious cognition is similar to social cognition, the existence of a *sensus divinitatis* is very unlikely. It would be a very odd thing to claim that humans have a *sensus socialis*, which produces beliefs about other people’s mental states on very limited input. Beliefs about other people’s mental states are believed to be the result of input by other people. Nonetheless, a reformed epistemologist should accept a *sensus socialis* if religious cognition is similar to social cognition. Since this will strike many as absurd, the existence of a distinct mechanism for religious beliefs should be given up as well.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that there are no reasons to assert the existence of Plantinga’s concept of the *sensus divinitatis* or a similar cognitive mechanism. I distinguished two arguments from Plantinga’s writings; one from God’s nature and one empirical argument.

Plantinga’s argument from God’s nature is unconvincing because God does not need a special cognitive mechanism to let Himself be known and letting himself known by making himself aware to the subject is a more likelier way. Alston has given an account that shows how this is possible. An account without special cognitive mechanism is preferable because it provides a clearer causal link between experience and belief, does not make God a deceiver.

I have also argued that the main empirical theories on religious cognition do not resemble Plantinga’s account of the *sensus divinitatis*. As a

result Plantinga's empirical argument also does not convince. The only theories that are more compatible with Plantinga's account are the ones where theistic beliefs result from overly active cognitive modularities but the theories appear to rely on naturalistic presuppositions and thus speak against both discussed accounts of religious epistemology.

Since there appear to be no good reasons for accepting a *sensus divinitatis* or similar cognitive mechanism, its existence is unlikely. Its existence is not ruled out because absence of evidence is of course not evidence of absence but without good reasons its existence should not be affirmed.

Notes

¹ Alvin Plantinga, „Is Belief in God Properly Basic?“, *Noûs*, 15 (1981): 41-51; Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian belief* (New York, N.Y: Oxford University Press, 2000).

² Plantinga, *Warranted Christian belief*.

³ Alvin Plantinga, „Is Belief in God Properly Basic?“, *Noûs* 15 (1981): 41-51; Alvin Plantinga, „Reason and belief in God,“ in A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff (eds.), *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff, „Can Belief in God Be Rational If It Has No Foundations?“ in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (eds.), *Faith and rationality : reason and belief in God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Kelly James Clark, *Return to Reason: A Critique of Enlightenment Evidentialism and a Defense of Reason and Belief in God* (Michigan, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1990); Michael Sudduth, „Reformed Epistemology and Christian Apologetics“, *Religious Studies*, 39 (2003): 299-321.

⁵ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian belief*, 148.

⁶ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian belief*.

⁷ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian belief*, 172.

⁸ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian belief*, 189.

⁹ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian belief*, 188.

¹⁰ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian belief*.

¹¹ Plantinga, „Is Belief in God Properly Basic?“; „Reason and belief in God“; *Warranted Christian belief*.

¹² See Alvin Plantinga, *The Ontological Argument From St. Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers* (London: Macmillan, 1968); Alvin Plantinga, „Two dozen (or so) theistic arguments“, in Deane-Peter Baker (ed.), *Alvin Plantinga* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

¹³ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian belief*, 241-289.

¹⁴ William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1991).

¹⁵ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 29.

¹⁶ Alston, *Perceiving God*.

¹⁷ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 196.

¹⁸ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian belief*, 182.

¹⁹ Alston *Perceiving God*, 197.

²⁰ Herman Philipse, *God in the Age of Science: A Critique of Religious Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), section 15.10.

²¹ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian belief*, 180-181.

²² John L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Cornell University Press, 2006).

²³ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian belief*, 174.

²⁴ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 28.

²⁵ I owe the examples to Jesse Bering's discussion of symbolic manifestations of mental states. See Jesse Bering, „The Existential Theory of Mind”, *Review of General Psychology*, 6 (2002): 3.

²⁶ Kelly James Clark and Justin L. Barrett, „Reformed Epistemology and the Cognitive Science of Religion”, *Faith and Philosophy*, 27 (2010).

²⁷ Jonathan Jong, Christopher Kavanagh, and Aku Visala, „Born idolaters: The limits of the philosophical implications of the cognitive science of religion”, *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, 57 (2015): 244-66, emphasis added HVE.

²⁸ Jerry A. Fodor, *The Modularity of mind : an essay on faculty psychology* (Cambridge : MIT Press, 1983).

²⁹ Justin Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2004).

³⁰ The theory of mind is the mechanism responsible for forming beliefs about other people's mental states. Jesse Bering, „The Existential Theory of Mind”, *Review of General Psychology*, 6 (2002): 3-24; Robert N. McCauley, *Why Religion is Natural and Science is Not* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

³¹ K. Gray, A. Waytz, and L. Young, „The Moral Dyad: A Fundamental Template Unifying Moral Judgment”, *Psychological Inquiry*, 23 (2012): 206-15; K. Gray and D. M. Wegner, „Blaming God for Our Pain: Human Suffering and the Divine Mind”, *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 14 (2010): 7-16.

³² Pehr Granqvist and Lee A Kirkpatrick, „Attachment and religious representations and behavior,” in Jude Cassidy and Phillip R. Shaver (eds.), *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications 2nd Edition* (New York: Guilford Press: 2008).

³³ Clark and Barrett, „Reformed Epistemology”, 179.

³⁴ Although Boyer does not state it explicitly, his book suggests that these templates are innate. Boyer himself considers this an unimportant question.

³⁵ In Boyer's view, concepts are viable when they get transmitted and are remembered easily.

³⁶ Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Human Instincts That Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors* (London: Vintage: 2002).

³⁷ Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?*.

³⁸ Boyer, *Religion Explained*.

³⁹ Justin Barrett 'Why Santa Claus is not a God', *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, 8 (2008): 149-61.

⁴⁰ Boyer, *Religion Explained*.

⁴¹ Clark and Barrett, „Reformed Epistemology”.

⁴² Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 357.

⁴³ Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 357.

⁴⁴ Bering, „The Existential Theory of Mind”; McCauley, *Why Religion is Natural*.

⁴⁵ Gervais, „Perceiving Minds and Gods”, 7.

⁴⁶ Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press: 1967).

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