CHRISTIAN BELIEF AND PLATONIC RATIONALITY

Plato may plausibly be said to have held the following epistemological thesis: one's beliefs are not rational unless one is able successfully to defend them against any rational criticism that may be brought against them. Let us call this the Platonic Principle and the conception of rationality it embodies the Platonic conception. I will examine what are in effect appeals to the Platonic Principle that have been made by certain critics of Christian belief. Various Christian beliefs are attacked, and with some frequency, by experts in various highly technical fields – like cosmology, evolutionary biology, and Old Testament history. (For example, a group of respected experts on Old Testament history has recently proclaimed that King David has no more historical reality than King Arthur – and, of course, they do not merely assert this thesis; they offer detailed arguments in its support.) Each of these attacks takes the form of a highly technical scientific or historical argument, and each of these arguments has this feature: only a very few people – those with the appropriate highly specialized scientific or historical training – are in a position to evaluate it. I will examine the following question: How should the Christian who encounters these arguments respond to them when he or she lacks the scientific or scholarly competence to evaluate them? I will make the abstract point that the Christian's inability to evaluate such arguments argues against the rationality of Christian belief only on a Platonic conception of rationality. I will further argue that – all questions of religion aside – a consistent adherence to the Platonic conception of rationality is inconsistent with the demands of ordinary human life. I will finally turn from these abstract points to an examination of certain "highly technical" arguments against various Christian beliefs, arguments that I have some understanding of but lack the technical training to evaluate, and show by example how I think the Christian who encounters such arguments should respond to them.

The Rationality of Theism, 145-159.

At any given moment, we find ourselves with a variety of beliefs: that the sun is shining, that Oswald acted alone, that a fair coin that has been tossed and has landed "heads" ten times in a row is almost certain to land "tails" next time, that Freud uncovered the infantile roots of neurotic behavior in adults.... Some of these beliefs are in some sense "better" than others: better in a way that relates to, as one might say, their *grounding* – rather than to the contributions they make to the psychological equilibrium of the individual, the stability of society, the elimination of repressive institutions, or to the production of great art. The "grounding" of a person's beliefs in the sense in which I use the term is much more intimately related to the truth-values of these beliefs than are the benign psychological or social effects of that person's holding them. The nature of the "grounding" of one's belief is what the intellectually hostile, the skeptical, and the merely curious are asking for, each in their own way, when they say to someone who has expressed a belief, "How can you possibly think that?," or "Could be. I don't know. What makes you think so?" or "Gee, I never heard *that!* How did they find that out?" And these questions presuppose the concept of truth.

Some of our beliefs, I should say, are *well-grounded*. They are grounded in the way a belief should be. Their grounding is of the right sort. It is difficult to define or explain the idea of well-groundedness, although it is easy enough to give examples of beliefs that are well-grounded and beliefs that are not. My belief that I am now wearing shoes, my belief that Mars has two moons, and my belief that Nietzsche was born in the nineteenth century are certainly well-grounded. My belief that there is no life on Mars, my belief that time-travel is impossible, and my belief that I have free will are, I think, *probably* well-grounded. (I do have these beliefs; I am of the opinion, but I am not certain that, they are well-grounded.) If anyone believes that a fair coin that has been tossed and has landed "heads" ten times in a row is almost certain to land "tails" next time, that person's belief is *not* well-grounded. If anyone believes that Freud uncovered the infantile roots of neurotic behavior in adults, then, *in my opinion*, that person's belief is not well-grounded.

If I cannot give a definition or explanation of what it is for a belief to be well-grounded, I can at least state what I believe to be a necessary condition for well-groundedness. Suppose a person holds a certain belief. Suppose that person states that belief and is asked questions like those I mentioned above: "How can you possibly think that?" or "What makes you think so?" or "How did people find that out?" (These questions no doubt differ importantly in meaning, but I think that anything that was a good answer to one would be a good answer to either of the others – at least in cases in which both questions were appropriate to the assertion of the belief: If I say, "My parents were married in 1939," it might well be appropriate to say, "How do you know that?"; it would not be appropriate to say, "How did people find that out?") A person's belief is well-grounded only if there is an answer to such questions, only if there exists a proposition such that if the person produced that proposition in response to such a question, that proposition would be a satisfactory answer to that question. (But I do not say that a person's belief is well-grounded only if that person is able to produce a proposition satisfying this description on demand or knows of one of them or is in a position to come to know one of them or is intellectually capable of grasping any of them. Whether one or more of these further "only ifs" hold is a matter I have not pronounced on.)

Sometimes there are cases in which – or so I should say – one's belief is well-grounded but it is not at all easy for one to answer the question, "Why do you believe that?" or "How do you know that?" I believe, for example, that Mars has two moons, but if you asked me why I thought that Mars had two moons or how I knew that Mars had two moons, I could give at best a very vague answer. (Something like, "Well, I've often heard or read that Mars had two moons – although I can't now remember any particular occasion on which I did – and I'm sure I've never heard anything that contradicted it, and I'm sure that it's been said so often that if it weren't true the experts would frequently go on record as denying it and that I'd remember some of these denials.) A planetary astronomer, however, could give a very different sort of answer to this question – an answer that consisted in a presentation of astronomical rather than social facts and reasoning. And it seems clear that if *my* belief that Mars has two moons is well-grounded, this can only be because the astronomer's answer to this question is correct and in every other way satisfactory: if astronomers do not have an adequate "astronomical" grounding for their belief that Mars has two moons, then I do not have an adequate "social" grounding for my belief that Mars has two moons.

Let me risk anachronism and say something about Plato. Although he does not – at least not very frequently – use any single term or phrase that corresponds to my term "well-grounded," he might be said to hold that only someone who could give what I have called an "astronomical" answer to the question "Why do you think that Mars has two moons?" has a well-grounded belief that Mars has two moons. If, by some magic, the Platonic Socrates could be made flesh and taught the peculiar dialect of English that I speak – peculiar in that it contains terms like "well-grounded" and other philosophical terms of art – I find it hard to believe that he could be convinced that my belief that the area of the square on the hypotenuse of a

right triangle is equal to the sums of the areas of the squares on the other two sides is well-grounded. For if I asserted this proposition, and he asked me why I accepted it, the only answer I could give (I am sorry to say) would be of the "social" type of which I provided an illustration a moment ago; I could not give the kind of answer a geometer could give.

But it seems to me that it is just wrong to say that my acceptance of the Pythagorean Theorem is not well-grounded. Whatever the Platonic Socrates would say, my acceptance of the Pythagorean Theorem *is* well-grounded, and so are a vast number of my beliefs that do not have the kind of grounding that an expert in their subject-matter could provide: my belief that Mars has two moons, my belief that Tokyo is the capital of Japan, my belief that table salt is a chemical compound of sodium and chlorine.... My imaginary Socrates might reply to my protest that if I am right in thinking that the beliefs I have mentioned are well-grounded, what I am right about is of little interest to the true lover of wisdom. Wisdom is knowledge, and these beliefs of mine are not instances of knowledge but of opinion; I am claiming (he would say) to have some opinions that are better-grounded than certain other opinions, but they are for all that only opinions. Just as one reflection in a pool may be less distorted than another, one opinion may be better-grounded than another, but the least distorted reflection is still a mere reflection and the best-grounded opinion is still a mere opinion. If Socrates did so reply, it might appear that our difference was not one of substance. An observer might say, "Well, van Inwagen is interested in the distinction between good and bad opinions, and Socrates is not; Socrates is interested in the distinction between knowledge and opinion. They're really just talking about two different things." I doubt, however, whether Socrates would be happy with the suggestion that there are good and bad opinions; I think he would say that this was like saying that there are real and unreal reflections. But I will not pursue this question. I will, rather, say more about my view of well-groundedness.

My view is not simply that there are good and bad opinions. Earlier, I said, "Some of our beliefs, I should say, are *well-grounded*. They are grounded in the way a belief should be. Their grounding is of the right sort." I said that I could not explain in any useful way what I meant by this. I can, however, say something about its consequences: A well-grounded belief has this feature: it is a belief on which it may be morally permissible to act, even when a great deal is at stake. I say "may be" rather than "is" because the relation between well-groundedness and the morality of action is very complicated, and I am not sure anyone has given a good account of it. Suppose, for example, that I believe that Freudian psychology is a pseudo-science and, in consequence, is usually harmful to the patient who undergoes therapy that is based on its alleged discoveries. And suppose this belief of mine is well-grounded. But suppose I am unduly modest and do not *regard* this belief of mine as well-grounded. Or suppose I am not modest and *do* regard the belief as well-grounded, but do not regard this second-order belief (that is, my belief in the well-groundedness of my belief that Freudian psychology is a pseudo-science) as itself well-grounded. (This second case is complicated; here is a first-person expression of what the case represents me as believing: "I think that Freudian psychology is a pseudo-science, and it is my opinion that this belief is well-grounded; but I'm not sure whether this opinion is right; I *think* I've investigated the matter with sufficient care, but maybe I should have looked at more evidence or thought about it more carefully.") In either case, it's far from clear whether my having a well-grounded belief that Freudian psychology is a pseudo-science justifies me in, say, undertaking to have Freudian psychotherapy banned. It is far from clear whether my well-grounded belief is a sufficient moral basis for setting out to oppose Freudian therapy. And it is, perhaps, sometimes morally permissible for one to act on an opinion that is *not* well-grounded – say, in an emergency.

Having said this, I nevertheless record my conviction that many of my well-grounded beliefs are a sufficient moral basis for undertaking a course of action that can be expected to have bad consequences if those beliefs turn out to be false. And – here is the important point – among these well-grounded beliefs are many that fall in areas in which some people have expert knowledge and I do not. I should be, at least in certain circumstances, justified in betting a large sum of money, money needed by those who depend on me, that Mars has two moons. This is an artificial case, of course; one can always turn a case in which a belief has no practical consequences into one in which it does by imagining a bet (with serious stakes) about whether that belief is correct. But non-artificial cases abound. Consider, for example, the following beliefs:

- that the drug atenolol effectively lowers high blood-pressure and has no serious side-effects.
- that travel by air is much safer than travel by car.
- that bank deposits are insured by the government.
- that the votes cast in elections (in many countries, anyway) are generally counted fairly and accurately.
- that the news items in the *New York Times* or the *Times* of London or the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* are not wholesale fabrications (like the ones Winston Smith was employed to produce in *1984*).

I myself hold these beliefs and many, many others like them – like them in the following respects. First, these beliefs are not of purely theoretical interest to me. My actions depend on these beliefs, and I would act in quite different ways about serious matters if I changed my mind about any of them. Secondly, there are people who are far better positioned, epistemically speaking, with respect to the content of these beliefs than I am. Thirdly, the only answer I could give if I were asked with respect to any of them, "Why do you believe that?" or "How do you know that?" would be of the "social" sort. (The "epistemically better positioned" people I alluded to – doctors, statisticians, members of congressional banking committees, commissioners of elections, newspaper reporters – could give other sorts of answers to these questions than I, answers that were not merely "social" but, so to speak, much more intimately connected with the relevant facts than mine.)

I would maintain that there is nothing wrong *per se* with my holding and acting on beliefs of this sort. Beliefs of this sort can be well-grounded in a way that makes it morally permissible to act on them. It would be nice if I had some sort of argument for this conclusion, but I don't – not really. I can only point out that if this conclusion is wrong, it is at any rate a wrong conclusion that we all share. And it is no accident that we all share it. It is impossible to imagine a stable, viable human community in which any significant number of people dissent from this belief. Or it is possible to imagine such a community only in the sense that it is possible to imagine a community of people who go all the way and become Pyrrhonian skeptics. We might imagine a community of people who one day decided to believe only what they could know in a sense that would satisfy Plato. (Plato's ideal community, we remember, was not quite of that sort; it was, however, *ruled* by people who believed only what they properly knew.) But if the members of this community were serious in their Platonic rationalism, the community would not last very long. Of course they might not be serious: they might say things like this: "I don't believe that the operation all the doctors recommend would do me any good; only a trained physician or surgeon should have that belief; but as a practical matter I will act as if the doctors' advice was good." But to say this is not to be a serious Platonic rationalist. To see why it is not, ask yourself why the citizens of my imaginary community would say things like what I have imagined and not something like the following: "I don't believe that the operation all the doctors recommend would do me any good; only a trained physician or surgeon should have that belief; but as a practical matter I will act as if the doctors' advice was bad." The person who accepts the doctors' advice "as a practical matter" has not chosen that course of action by tossing a coin, after all.

He is acting on a belief: that following the advice of physicians and surgeons is more likely to have good practical consequences than ignoring it or flouting it. And this is not something he knows in the Platonic sense – not unless he is a trained statistician who has conducted a serious statistical analysis of the consequences of following the advice of physicians and surgeons.

I cannot, therefore, show that what I have called the Platonic conception of rationality is wrong. I have argued, however, that it is something we in practice reject and that a community of Platonic rationalists could not survive. It may seem to you that I have taken a long time to say something that is uncontroversial, at least in the modern or post-modern world, or whenever it is we live. And, indeed, no one today applies the Platonic conception of rationality universally. But many apply it selectively. Its selective employment is nowhere more evident than in its application to religious questions. To see what I mean by this, consider the following well-known passage from Van A. Harvey's 'New Testament Scholarship and Christian Belief':

> The gulf separating the conservative Christian believer and the New Testament scholar can be seen as the conflict between two antithetical ethics of belief.... New Testament scholarship is now so specialized and requires so much preparation and learning that the layperson has simply been disqualified from having any right to a judgment regarding the truth or falsity of certain historical claims. Insofar as the conservative Christian believer is a layperson who has no knowledge of New Testament scholarship, he or she is simply not entitled to certain historical beliefs at all. Just as the average layperson is scarcely in a position to have an informed judgment about the seventh letter of Plato, the relationship of Montezuma to Cortez, or the authorship of the Donation of Constantine, so the average layperson has no right to an opinion about the authorship of the Fourth Gospel or the trustworthiness of the synoptics.[1]

It is clear that this quotation represents the Platonic conception of rationality at work – but only in application to New Testament studies. We can imagine parallel statements based on the findings of experts in other areas of inquiry: only an evolutionary biologist has any right to an opinion about whether living organisms are products of intelligent design; only a trained cosmologist has any right to an opinion about the causal antecedents of the physical universe. It is a curious sociological fact – it seems to me to be a fact – that public statements extolling some local application of a Platonic conception of rationality are made only when the people who fall short epistemically according to the Platonic conception are traditional re-

ligious believers, generally Christians. Consider the following parody of my quotation from Harvey:

> The gulf separating the ordinary citizen and the professional economist can be seen as the conflict between two antithetical ethics of belief. The science of economics is now so specialized and requires so much preparation that the layperson has simply been disqualified from having any right to a judgment regarding the truth or falsity of certain economic claims. Insofar as the citizen is a layperson who has no knowledge of economics, he or she is simply not entitled to certain economic beliefs at all. Just as the average layperson is scarcely in a position to have an informed judgment about the evolutionary relationship between birds and dinosaurs, the mass of the top quark, or the possibility of room-temperature superconductors, so the average layperson has no right to an opinion about the long-term effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement or the capacity of public-works programs to create employment.

It is not really possible to imagine an economist saying this in public – although no doubt many economists say it in their hearts and even in their departmental common rooms. Any economist who did say this in public would immediately be buried by an avalanche of indignant condemnation from every quarter. I am not saying that the economist who said this wouldn't be right. I am saying only that it is not socially possible to say it. And, of course, I do not mean to imply that there is anything special about economics in this respect. Imagine, for example, a physicist informing Congress that legislators who are not high-energy physicists simply have no right to an opinion about whether the Super-conducting Super-collider should be built. (Physicists are less worldly than economists, and a few of them did say something like this.) And, so far as I can see, it is possible to say things of this sort only in the case in which the "average layperson" is an adherent of some traditional religion – not to put too fine a point upon it, a traditional Christian.

Why is this? Why is the Platonic conception of rationality "privileged" (as my post-modernist colleagues say) only when the topic under discussion is some aspect of traditional religious belief? We may well ask. But let us not linger over this sociological question. I want to return to my quotation from Harvey and examine some of the epistemological language it contains. Here, isolated, are the relevant phrases:

> ... the layperson has simply been disqualified from having any right to a judgment....
> ... is simply not entitled to certain historical beliefs at all.
> ... is scarcely in a position to have an informed judgment about ....
> ... has no right to an opinion about ....

I find the last pair particularly instructive. Note that Harvey equates, or seems to equate

> *x* is not in a position to have an informed judgment about *y*

and

> x has no right to an opinion about *y*.

Let us examine these two phrases. I take "an informed judgment" to mean "an expert's judgment." A planetary astronomer is in this sense in a position to make an informed judgement about the number of moons Mars has, but just about no one else is. (I'm going to change Harvey's "have a judgment" to "make a judgment"; in my dialect of English, anyway, one makes judgments and has opinions.) A professional economist is in a position to make an informed judgement about whether public-works programs lower the unemployment rate, but just about no one else is – and so on.

What does "a right to an opinion about" mean? The language of "rights" is most at home in discussions of politics. In most cases in which someone makes the protest, "I've got a right to my opinion," it would make sense for the protester to go on to say, "It's a free country, after all." It is obvious, however, that Harvey is not using these words in any political sense. In many countries, one has the *political* right to any opinion whatever (although the laws of many of those countries place very strenuous restrictions on the ways and places in which certain opinions may be publicly expressed), and this is certainly true of the countries whose citizens formed the bulk of Harvey's intended audience. And the existence of this right is a matter of positive law and is wholly uncontroversial. I think that the concept Harvey means to express by the words "having a right" is just the concept I mean to express by the words "well-grounded": someone who holds the opinion that *p* has a right to this opinion (in Harvey's sense) just in the case that that person's belief that *p* is well-grounded (in my sense). And if I am wrong in this interpretation, at least my "well-groundedness" must be a sufficient condition for Harvey's "having a right." It is hard to see how a person's belief that *p* could be well-grounded and that person yet *not* have a right to the opinion that *p* – it is certainly hard to see how

this could be if "right" is an epistemic concept, and Harvey's argument requires that it be an epistemic concept.

But if this is so, then Harvey's examples are very puzzling. Take the case of the Donation of Constantine. It happens that I do have an opinion about the authorship of the Donation of Constantine: I believe that Constantine was not its author. And yet I am not in a position to make an informed judgment on this matter: I know absolutely nothing of the grounds that Valla alleged in support of its being a forgery, or the grounds on which most modern scholars judge it to be an eighth-century Frankish production. If you asked me why I believed that Constantine was not the author of the Donation, my answer would be of the social sort, very similar in its epistemological structure to my answer to the question why I believe that Mars has two moons. Something like this: "Well, that's what all the reference books say. And the fifteenth-century arguments for its being a forgery were almost immediately accepted, despite the fact that their conclusion went against the political interests of the Papacy – and despite the fact that the men who first raised doubts about the authenticity of the Donation (Valla, Nicholas of Cusa, and Bishop Pecock) were in considerable trouble with the Church about other matters. So they must have been pretty strong arguments. And no reference work mentions any later scholar who has defended the authenticity of the Donation. And, scholars being the perverse and contentious lot they are, if *no* scholar defends a certain position, it must be one that it's simply *impossible* to defend." And I think it very probable that a belief backed by this sort of reasoning is well-grounded.

Now it is possible that I have misunderstood Harvey's example. I said, "I do have an opinion about the authorship of the Donation of Constantine: I believe that Constantine was not its author." But perhaps Harvey was referring to some scholarly controversy that is unknown to me. For all I know, there is some group of scholars that holds that one particular eighth-century Frank was its author and another group that identifies some other eighth-century Frank as its author. Perhaps there are fierce academic wars over this question. If this were so, the point of Harvey's example might have been to illustrate and underwrite something like the following epistemic principle:

> If the experts disagree about whether *p*, no non-expert has a right to an opinion about whether *p*.

One can easily see that this principle has profound implications for what non-experts should believe about the New Testament, for New Testament scholars disagree about practically everything. Did Jesus ever say, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God"? Some experts say Yes, and some say No, and the principle therefore entails that no one who is not a trained New Testament scholar has any right to an opinion about whether Jesus said these words. And why not? The argument is presumably this: a non-expert's opinion on this matter could not be well-grounded: the non-expert is not in a position to make an *informed* judgment about the authenticity of the Seventh Beatitude, and "some experts accept it and some don't" is not sufficient for a belief in its authenticity's having the socially based well-groundedness that I discussed above.

This epistemic principle, however, is a very strong one, and, when you think about it, not very plausible. Consider, for example, philosophy. We philosophers are the experts on philosophical questions – assuming there *are* any experts on philosophical questions, a reservation I'll later take up in a more general form. But can any of us say the following with a straight face: "Some philosophers think there is such a thing as free will and some don't; therefore, non-philosophers should one and all suspend judgment on the question whether there is free will"? One might in fact wonder why the argument for the principle that I set out in the preceding paragraph shouldn't, if it were sound, be taken a step further. Consider this question. If the experts disagree, do even the experts have a right to their opinion? I am, perhaps, an expert on the problem of free will and I think free will is incompatible with determinism. But David Lewis is an expert on the problem of free will, and he thinks free will is compatible with determinism. (And I happen to know that he knows all the relevant arguments and understands them perfectly.) Shouldn't that fact lead me to doubt whether my belief that free will is incompatible with determinism is well-grounded? If the original principle is correct, I don't see how to resist this extension of it. I can indeed set out an "expert's" argument for the incompatibility of free will and determinism. But can I honestly regard this argument as cogent – as an argument good enough to render belief in its conclusion well-grounded? Lewis, who is an expert evaluator of such arguments, understands it perfectly, has considered it carefully, and still rejects its conclusion. If it is cogent, why does it not convince him that its conclusion is true? The point is a perfectly general one. If Tom is an expert in New Testament studies who thinks that the Seventh Beatitude is inauthentic, and if he knows that Alice, an equally well-qualified expert on the Gospels, thinks that it is authentic, shouldn't that fact lead him to doubt whether his belief in the inauthenticity of the Seventh Beatitude is

well-grounded – at least if he knows that Alice knows and understands all the arguments for inauthenticity (which is certainly possible)?

There are weaker and initially more plausible epistemological principles about the authority of experts than this one, but even these have their problems. Consider, for example, what I shall call Russell's Principle (for I seem to remember having seen it somewhere in Russell's writings):

> If all or almost all the relevant experts agree that *p*, then no non-expert should believe that not-*p*.

Before we examine this principle, let us make explicit a problem that has really been with us all along: who are the "relevant experts"? Is there really an epistemologically important sense in which philosophers are experts on philosophical questions – as physicians are experts on medical questions? Are astrologers the experts on astrological questions? (If so, Russell's Principle has an obvious counterexample; if not, by what criterion are they to be ruled out?) Could one sensibly have said to Frederick the Great or Lenin, "Look, the theologians are the experts on theological questions, and they all agree that God exists; so you shouldn't believe that God doesn't exist"?

I have nothing of any very compelling interest to say about the important epistemological problem of "identifying the experts," so, for present purposes, I shall simply assume that we have somehow identified the experts in New Testament studies. And I shall assume that this is the class of people we have so identified: the experts in New Testament studies are those who hold the appropriate degrees from and academic positions in academic institutions accredited by the governments of continental Europe and the English-speaking countries – plus anyone else whom the members of this "core group" would be willing to recognize as well-qualified in New Testament studies. Given this identification, I think that even the relatively modest principle I have attributed to Russell is false. Here is a counterexample. Most of the experts believe that most of the New Testament was composed after the fall of Jerusalem. I, however, a mere layman, believe that they are wrong. I have been convinced that they are wrong by the arguments of J. A. T. Robinson's *Redating the New Testament*.[2] I won't go into these arguments here; my epistemological points are as follows: (1) You do not have to be an expert in New Testament studies to follow them. (2) They are very powerful arguments, arguments with the kind of obvious *prima facie* strength that every philosopher would like to have for his or her favorite philosophical theses. (3) I have good reason to believe that they have never been seriously addressed by those who accept the denials of their conclusions. (This reason is based simply on my asking recognized New Testament scholars how they would reply to them. The only answer I have ever received is this: "Well, we listened very carefully to Robinson's arguments in the seventies, and we weren't convinced.") (4) There is an obvious sociological explanation for the offhand rejection of these arguments; if these arguments were generally accepted, a vast range of New Testament scholarship would simply have to be thrown out, since it has the denial of Robinson's conclusions as an essential premise. It seems to me on the basis of these considerations that it is at least very probable that my belief that most of the New Testament was composed before the destruction of Jerusalem – and indeed before A.D. 65 – is well-grounded. My opinion of the epistemological status of this belief is thus comparable to my opinion of the epistemological status of my belief that there is no life on Mars, my belief that time-travel is impossible, and my belief that I have free will: all these beliefs are, I think, *probably* well-grounded. And how could it be that I am right when most of the people with the appropriate academic credentials are wrong? Well, isn't it possible that some sort of systematic error might infiltrate an academic field and become well-nigh ubiquitous in it? And isn't it at least possible that some people outside the field see this? (Consider the case of the infiltration of literary studies by "theory" and the recognition of the fact that "theory" is nonsense by people outside the field of literary studies–by the physicist Alan Sokal, for example.) Russell's Principle is plausible only if we ignore this possibility, and I don't think we can ignore it.

I am not, of course, suggesting that we laypeople should ignore what physicians tell us about gallstones or astronomers about the formation of neutron stars or historians about the consequences of the battle of Tours. I have already said that I regard many of my own beliefs as well-grounded because they are based on the testimony of experts – based in the right way on the testimony of real experts. (But as to what "based in the right way" and "real experts" mean, I have nothing of interest to tell you.) My target has not been experts, but rather the selective application of the Platonic conception of rationality to the beliefs of laypeople by those claiming the status of experts or by those who appeal to the authority of others who claim to be experts. My primary example has been drawn from the field of New Testament studies, but that was because I was in possession of a concise, explicit quotation pertaining to New Testament studies that expressed the point of view I wanted to criticize, rather than because New Testament studies are in any way unique. I've mentioned evolutionary biology and cosmology as additional examples of fields in which experts have made pronouncements based on a selective application of the Pla-

tonic conception of rationality, and I've alluded to a recent controversy in Old Testament studies in which experts have denied a belief that is probably essential to Christianity, the real, historical existence of King David. I could have talked about any or all of these fields of study; it's only that I didn't have a really good quotation to work with in any of them. Before I leave the Harvey quotation, I want to mention one more feature of general epistemological interest that it displays. Note the opposition in its first sentence between "the conservative Christian believer" and "the New Testament scholar." The obvious sense of this opposition is that no one is both. I suppose that this thesis could be true if by calling someone "a conservative Christian believer," one implied that that person accepted a "harmony of the Gospels" – that that person believed that every detail of all the Gospel narratives is true.

Consider, for example, the story of the man (Luke calls him a "ruler") who asks Jesus about what has to be done to inherit eternal life. Mark and Luke tell us that Jesus' reply begins with the words, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." In Matthew, however, the words are, "Why do you ask me about what is good? One there is who is good." According to the "harmony of the Gospels" view, Jesus must have said both these things, one saying having been reported by Mark and Luke, and the other by Matthew. I am sure that no New Testament scholar is a "conservative Christian" in this sense. But, really, this is a pretty stringent sense, and it is certainly not the sense that Harvey meant his words to have. What Harvey means by a "conservative Christian" is this: someone who takes the Gospels to be more or less accurate sources of information about the ministry, Passion, and Resurrection of Jesus. And there are perfectly respectable New Testament scholars who are conservative Christians in this sense. How can Harvey ignore this fact? Well, I'm afraid he's just engaging in a practice that is unfortunately present in every academic field I know of: When summing up the consensus in your field, treat only those who agree with you on the larger issues as legitimate representatives of the field. (Thus, we may be told by a philosopher that naturalism is now the consensus among philosophers. If you say to this philosopher, "But what about Putnam and Kripke and van Fraassen and Dummett and the Adamses and Alston and Plantinga?" you will be told in some involuted way that naturalism can manage to be the consensus in philosophy even if many philosophers of the first rank don't accept it.) My lesson is that the layperson who reads some work by a specialist in some field should follow this rule: Do not uncritically accept that specialist's statements, explicit or implied, about the scholarly consensus in that field.

My purpose in this paper has been entirely negative. Nothing I have said has the least tendency to show that Christian beliefs on any matter are well-grounded – even for some Christians, much less for all. I have been concerned to show that the Platonic conception of rationality, selectively applied, has no power to show that the beliefs of Christians – even the most ordinary Christians in the pew – are not well-grounded.

Notes

1 Harvey, Van A.: 1986, 'New Testament Scholarship and Christian Belief,' in: R. Joseph Hoffman and Gerald A. Larue (eds.), *Jesus in History and Myth*, Prometheus Books, Amherst, N.Y., 193-200. The quoted passage occurs on p. 197.

2 Robinson, J. A. T.: 1976, *Redating the New Testament*, SCM Press, London.