The evidentialist objection to belief in God

The evidentialist objection to belief in God is really a family of arguments. The arguments all can be presented as having two premises. The first says that the belief that God exists is irrational, is unsupported by evidence, or lacks some other positive status. The second premise says that we should reject beliefs which are unsupported by evidence, or lack whatever the relevant positive status is supposed to be. The conclusion is, in some cases, that we should believe that God does not exist, and in some cases that we should not believe in God. So they can all be presented as of one of the following two forms:

> *Evidentialist argument for atheism*
> 1. The belief in God is X.
> 2. If a belief in something is X, then we should believe that that thing does not exist.
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> C. We should believe that God does not exist.
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> *Evidentialist argument against theism (and hence for either agnosticism or atheism)*
> 1. The belief in God is X.
> 2. If a belief in something is X, then we should not believe in that thing.
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> C. We should not believe in God.

Arguments of this form can be criticized in two main ways. First, sometimes they assume something about the belief in God which they are not entitled to assume without more argument (e.g., X='is irrational'). In this case, premise 1 can be rejected. Second, sometimes they put such high constraints on rational belief that premise 2 can be rejected (e.g., X='cannot be proven to be true'). A good evidentialist argument has to find a middle ground between these two flaws.

Clifford does not quite gives an evidentialist argument of this form, but he says things which strongly suggest that he has an argument of this sort in mind. Does he distinguish between the 'for atheism' version and the 'against theism' version?

van Inwagen, in effect, considers various possible candidates for "X", and explains why he doesn't think that any of them turn one of the above into a good argument. Some possibilities he considers for the 'for atheism' version:

> X = 'lacks any reason to think that it is true'
> 'lacks any reason to think that it is true and its truth is highly improbable'
> 'lacks any reason to think that it is true and its truth is requires the existence of something very different from things we know about by experience'

Some possibilities he considers for the 'against theism' version:

> X = 'posits a being which is not needed for the explanation of any natural thing'
> 'posits a being which, for all anyone knows, is not needed for the explanation of any natural thing'
> 'posits a being which no argument forces us to believe in'
> 'posits a being which is unnecessary to explain my sensory evidence'

van Inwagen's surprising closing claim is that for his objection to evidentialist arguments to fail,

> 'there would have to be some thesis such that a person who accepted that thesis and had no cogent or compelling argument for it was irrational – and was irrational simply because that person accepted it without having a cogent or compelling argument for it. And there is no such thesis.'

Is this true?