

**REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY:
RATIONAL RELIGIOUS BELIEF WITHOUT ARGUMENTS**

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[pre-print; published in John Greco, Jonathan Fuqua, and Tyler McNabb (eds.) *The Cambridge Handbook of Religious Epistemology* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).]

The key idea of Reformed Epistemology is that religious beliefs can be rational even if they are formed and sustained noninferentially, that is, not on the basis of arguments.¹ The contrary view—that religious beliefs can be rational only if held inferentially on the basis of arguments—has, at times, been a popular and even a dominant view in various academic communities. Thus, Reformed Epistemology is controversial and has been a minority position in philosophy of religion, even among certain groups of religious believers who endorse the rationality of their own religious beliefs. But since its inception (in its contemporary incarnation) a little more than forty years ago it has grown in influence to become one of the more prominent positions, in analytic philosophy of religion, regarding the rationality of religious belief.

Part 1 of this chapter will say more about what Reformed Epistemology is and how it has developed. Part 2 will review several objections to Reformed Epistemology, along with some responses to them.

¹ Although I will speak most often in this paper of rationality, Reformed Epistemologists also make this same point about other epistemic virtues such as knowledge, justification, warrant, and entitlement.

1. WHAT IS REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY?

1.1 The Main Ingredients of the View

As noted above, the main idea of Reformed Epistemology is that religious beliefs can be epistemically appropriate even if they are held noninferentially—i.e., not on the basis of inference or argument. Unfortunately, the term ‘Reformed Epistemology’ as a name for that view can be and has been misleading. The rationale for the name is that the view, at least in the form in which it was introduced into the contemporary discussion four decades ago, was inspired by thinkers in the Reformed tradition in Christianity.² But although it is certainly true that the Reformed tradition provides inspiration for the key thesis of Reformed Epistemology, there is nothing in that key thesis that is incompatible with non-Reformed or non-Protestant Christianity or even non-Christian religion: Pentecostals, Catholics, and Muslims can adopt Reformed Epistemology’s key thesis.³ For this reason, some have (quite understandably) resisted the ‘Reformed Epistemology’ label.

Would another name for the view be better? Perhaps. We could distinguish between Inferentialism and Noninferentialism with respect to religious belief: the former says that religious beliefs can be epistemically appropriate only if they are held inferentially (on the basis of arguments); the latter says that religious beliefs can be epistemically appropriate even if they are held noninferentially. Then the name ‘Reformed Epistemology’ could be replaced with

² See Plantinga (1980, 1983) and Wolterstorff (1983b). Both Plantinga and Wolterstorff are themselves part of the Reformed tradition.

³ See Baldwin and McNabb (2018) for discussion of non-Christian employment of the key ideas of Reformed Epistemology.

‘Noninferentialism with respect to religious belief’. But the shorter name has become entrenched so I’ll continue to use it.

A simple account of Reformed Epistemology says it *just is* the view that there can be noninferentially rational religious belief. But there are two difficulties with this simple account. To understand the first difficulty, consider *noninferentialism about belief in electrons*, the view that belief in electrons can be noninferentially rational. One version of this view says that belief in electrons can be noninferentially rational but only if it appropriately depends via testimony on someone else’s inferentially rational belief in electrons.⁴ For example, according to this version of the view, ordinary high school students can have rational *noninferential* belief in electrons (via testimony from their teachers) but only if someone in the testimonial chain leading to their belief in electrons (e.g., those in the scientific community) rationally believes in electrons *inferentially* on the basis of good arguments. This sort of noninferentialism applied to religious belief—call it ‘Weak Noninferentialism with respect to Religious Belief’ (WNR)—says that there can be *noninferentially* rational religious belief but *only if* it appropriately depends via testimony on someone else’s inferentially rational religious belief formed on the basis of good arguments. The difficulty, for our purposes here, is that Reformed Epistemology disagrees with WNR by insisting that S’s religious belief that p can be noninferentially rational *even if it’s not the case* that there was someone in a testimonial chain leading to S’s religious belief that p who rationally believed p inferentially (and even if S’s religious belief that p isn’t based on testimony at all).⁵ Thus, the simple account of Reformed Epistemology is problematic insofar as it

⁴ There are two main positions in the epistemology of testimony: reductionism (inspired by Hume), which insists that rational belief via testimony must be inferential (using other belief sources to infer the reliability of testimony before believing its outputs), and non-reductionism (inspired by Reid), which allows for rational belief via testimony to be noninferential. See Leonard (2021) and Lackey (2017) for some discussion of these differing views on testimony. The discussion of testimony in this chapter takes for granted the truth of nonreductionism.

⁵ Wykstra (1998) opposes Reformed Epistemology so understood, even though he allows for the truth of WNR.

classifies WNR as an instance of Reformed Epistemology when in fact Reformed Epistemologists reject WNR.

To understand the second difficulty with the simple account of Reformed Epistemology, note that some opponents of Reformed Epistemology allow that (contrary to WNR) there *can be* noninferentially rational religious beliefs that don't depend testimonially on inferentially rational religious beliefs.⁶ But they add (quite reasonably) that this can occur only if it's *false* that the person holding those noninferential religious beliefs *is or should be* aware of an undefeated defeater for them.⁷ The problem arises because this view—which we can call ‘Moderate Noninferentialism about Religious Belief’ (MNR)—can be endorsed by those who insist that all reflective and informed people *are, or should be*, aware of undefeated defeaters for their noninferential religious beliefs, which keeps all such beliefs from being rational. But Reformed Epistemologists deny that we have good reason to believe that all informed and reflective people are prevented from having noninferentially rational religious belief. Given that MNR is compatible with opposing Reformed Epistemology in this way, it does not adequately capture what Reformed Epistemology is, even though MNR (like WNR) allows that there *can be* noninferentially rational religious belief.⁸ Thus, another reason that the simple account of Reformed Epistemology is problematic is that it classifies MNR as an instance of Reformed Epistemology despite the fact that one can endorse MNR while rejecting Reformed Epistemology.

⁶ So the problem with these opponents, from the perspective of Reformed Epistemology, isn't the *same* as the problem with WNR.

⁷ A defeater for a belief is, roughly, a good reason for thinking that belief is either false or formed in an untrustworthy way. An undefeated defeater is, roughly, a defeater that isn't *itself* defeated by an awareness of good reasons for thinking that defeater is mistaken or untrustworthy.

⁸ Goldberg (2014) allows, at least for the sake of argument, that MNR may be true but still opposes Reformed Epistemology in just this way.

In light of these two difficulties for the simple account of Reformed Epistemology, consider what I'll call 'Strong Noninferentialism about Religious Belief' (SNR):

SNR: (1) A person S's noninferential religious belief that p *can be* rational *even if it's not the case that* that there was someone in a testimonial chain leading to S's belief that p who rationally believed p inferentially (in fact, even if S's belief that p wasn't based on testimony at all); and (2) we have no good reason to deny that there are many *actual cases* of noninferentially rational religious beliefs held by well-informed and reflective people in which it's *false* that these people are or should be aware of an undefeated defeater for these beliefs.⁹

SNR is closer to what actual Reformed Epistemologists hold. Thus, 'Reformed Epistemology' in this chapter will be understood as equivalent to SNR.¹⁰

Because the most influential Reformed Epistemologists (i.e., William Alston and Alvin Plantinga) are renowned *externalists* in epistemology, some people have been misled into thinking that Reformed Epistemology is tightly tied to being an externalist in epistemology. (Externalists in epistemology are those who think that our beliefs can be rational *even if we aren't* aware of what those beliefs have going for them; internalists are those who think our beliefs can be rational *only if we are* aware of what they have going for them.¹¹) However, Chris Tucker (2011) has shown that Reformed Epistemology can flourish in internalist soil.¹² Thus, some Reformed Epistemologists (both internalist and externalist) think that noninferential religious belief is epistemically appropriate in virtue of being based not inferentially on other beliefs via argument but noninferentially on some sort of *conscious experience*, which is also

⁹ We could add that, according to SNR, some of the beliefs that clause (1) says *can be* rational are also beliefs that clause (2) says *actually are* rational (or at least that we have no good reason to deny that they actually are rational).

¹⁰ With the proviso, noted earlier, that, in place of rationality, some Reformed Epistemologists might speak instead of other epistemic virtues, such as warrant, justification, or entitlement.

¹¹ For more details on what internalism and externalism in epistemology are, see Bergmann (2006: ch. 1) and Alston (1986).

¹² Given Wolterstorff's focus (see his 2010) on noninferential *entitlement* for religious beliefs—which requires, mainly, that they are held in accord with the believer's epistemic duties and obligation—his version of Reformed Epistemology might also be construed as internalist (at least by those who think that we generally are or can easily become *aware* of whether we are believing in accord with our epistemic duties and obligations).

what many epistemologists (internalist and externalist) think about perceptual belief.¹³ Other Reformed Epistemologists—typically externalists—think that noninferential religious belief (like other kinds of noninferential belief) can be epistemically appropriate even if not based on any conscious mental states at all.

In the cases where Reformed Epistemologists think rational noninferential religious beliefs are based on conscious mental states, on which sorts of conscious mental states do they think they are based? One kind of experiential evidence for noninferential theistic belief is dramatic religious experience, including in particular perceptual experience taken to be of God.¹⁴ Another more mundane kind of experiential basis for theistic belief consists, in part, of theistic seemings. (A seeming is the conscious experience you have when it seems to you that something is the case; it has the feel of a mental state “whose content reveals how things really are”.¹⁵) Ordinary theistic seemings—i.e., commonly experienced seemings about God—can be triggered by many things.¹⁶ They might be triggered by things causally upstream from and distinct from conscious experience, including things such as the direct activity of God (this is one way of thinking about at least some instances of what the Christian tradition calls ‘the testimony of the Holy Spirit’). But they can also be triggered by other experiences such as feelings of guilt or being forgiven or desperate fear or gratitude; other triggers can be experiences of awe upon

¹³ Where these externalists and internalists differ from each other is that *externalist* Reformed Epistemologists will think these sorts of noninferential religious and perceptual beliefs are rational in virtue of facts such as that they were formed reliably or in accord with proper function, whereas *internalist* Reformed Epistemologists will think they are rational in virtue of facts such as that they fit the believer’s (internally accessible) evidence.

¹⁴ This sort of experience is the focus of Alston (1991).

¹⁵ The quotation is from Tolhurst (1998: 298-9) who is emphasizing the *presentational phenomenology* of seemings, which is the feeling that their propositional content is being presented to you as true. For more discussion of what seemings are, see Bergmann (2021: 131-45).

¹⁶ Plantinga seems to have theistic seemings in mind in his (2000: 182-3) when he discusses the nature of the experiential evidence involved in the operation of the *sensus divinitatus*, which produces noninferential belief in God. There he notes that the common component of such evidence is doxastic experience, which appears to be the kind of experience involved in having a seeming. For Plantinga’s views on doxastic evidence, see Plantinga (2000: 110-11 and 1993a: 190-3).

perceiving the grandeur and majesty of oceans, mountains, or sky.¹⁷ Another way theistic seemings can arise is in response to the spoken or written testimony of others: we encounter the testimony and what is said simply seems right.¹⁸ Theistic seemings can also result from ruminating upon what we have learned about the complexity, mysteriousness, and possible origins of the natural world and of the human mind.¹⁹ Thus, the evidence for this sort of noninferential theistic belief needn't consist *solely* of theistic seemings. It can also include observations, experiences, testimonial evidence, reflections, as well as memories of these in response to which theistic seemings emerge noninferentially. In this way, noninferential belief in God can be like noninferential belief in the mental states of others: in each case, there is the relevant seeming (about God or about the mental states of others); and in each case there are often other kinds of experience that trigger those seemings (i.e., the experiences just mentioned that trigger theistic seemings; or perceptual experiences of facial expression, body language, and tone of voice that trigger seemings about the mental states of others).

1.2 Three Stages in the Development of Reformed Epistemology

The first stage of Reformed Epistemology (in its contemporary form) began in the late 1970s and early 1980s with work by Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and William Alston. This quickly led to the first definitive statements of the view in the 1983 volume *Faith and*

¹⁷ Plantinga (2000:174).

¹⁸ As Plantinga writes (2000: 250): 'We read Scripture, or something presenting scriptural teaching, or hear the gospel preached, or are told of it by parents, or encounter a scriptural teaching as the conclusion of an argument (or conceivably even as an object of ridicule), or in some other way encounter a proclamation of the Word. What is said simply seems right; it seems compelling; one finds oneself saying, "Yes, that's right, that's the truth of the matter; this is indeed the word of the Lord".'

¹⁹ Peirce (1965 [1908]).

Rationality, with papers by the three just mentioned and several other authors as well.²⁰ One main goal of these early statements was, as Wolterstorff (2010a: 345) emphasizes, “ground-clearing” of the sort Thomas Reid provided in responding to his predecessors. Very roughly, Descartes and Locke insisted that the justification of perceptual beliefs required good deductive or probabilistic arguments for the reliability of perception, arguments that took only what is certain as premises (where what is certain is what we know best via introspection, a priori intuition, and perhaps clear short-term memory). Reid’s reply was to highlight the implausible consequences of these views of Descartes and Locke and to insist that we can rely on perception as a source of justified noninferential belief apart from any independent verification of its reliability using other belief sources.²¹ The application to the religious case was clear: Reformed Epistemologists claimed that the sources of our noninferential religious beliefs can be rationally relied on to produce justified noninferential religious beliefs without first independently verifying their reliability using other belief sources. There was much discussion of the troubles associated with the classical foundationalism of Descartes and Locke and the connection between such classical foundationalism and opposition to Reformed Epistemology.²² Thus, this early stage of Reformed Epistemology exposed the problematic assumptions of Inferentialism about religious belief and argued against them in order to make way for Noninferentialism about religious belief.

Once this negative ground-clearing work was completed, the way was prepared for the second stage of development consisting of several definitive positive accounts of Reformed Epistemology. The most influential and powerful of these were provided by Alston and

²⁰ For helpful summaries of this early history, see Plantinga (1985: 55-64) and Wolterstorff (2001a: 334-45).

²¹ See Wolterstorff (1996 and 2001b).

²² See Plantinga (1983) and Wolterstorff (1983a).

Plantinga.²³ Alston's 1991 book, *Perceiving God*, defends the view that a kind of *perceptual* experience taken to be of God makes an important contribution to the justification of religious belief. The thought is that, in virtue of being seemingly aware (in a perceptual kind of way) of God's currently doing something or having some property, I can be justified in believing that God is doing that thing or that God has that property. And just as ordinary perceptual beliefs are noninferentially justified, so also these religious beliefs can be noninferentially justified.

Plantinga lays out his positive account of noninferentially warranted religious belief in his 2000 book, *Warranted Christian Belief*, the third member of his "warrant" trilogy.²⁴ In it, he proposes a model (which he calls the "extended A/C model" because it is inspired by Aquinas and Calvin), according to which Christian belief is produced noninferentially by a cognitive process (i.e., the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit) that is functioning properly in an appropriate cognitive environment, in accord with a design plan successfully aimed at truth.²⁵ If the model is true, then Christian belief is warranted (i.e., it has enough of what is required to turn true belief into knowledge)—or at least this is so given the account of warrant defended in Plantinga (1993a). Moreover, although Plantinga defends merely the epistemic possibility of this model, he also claims that it is very likely that it or something like it is true, if Christian belief is true. Neither Alston (1991) nor Plantinga (2000) explicitly emphasize that they are instances of

²³ Wolterstorff worked out his version of Reformed Epistemology in Wolterstorff (1995a, 1995b, and 1999) and in other papers in his (2010). His account focused on entitlement rather than, like Plantinga, on warrant or, like Alston, on justification. Wolterstorff's version of Reformed Epistemology didn't get the same attention or have the same influence as the books by Alston and Plantinga discussed in the main text.

²⁴ See also Plantinga (1993a and 1993b), the first two members of his "warrant" trilogy, as well as his (2015), which is a shorter and more accessible version of Plantinga (2000).

²⁵ This extended A/C model, which focuses on the work of the Holy Spirit, is discussed in Plantinga (2000: ch. 8). The non-extended original A/C model, which focuses on the warrant not of specifically Christian belief but of more generic theistic belief, is discussed in Plantinga (2000: ch. 6). The emphasis in the latter case is not on the testimony of the Holy Spirit but on the workings of a cognitive faculty Plantinga (following John Calvin) calls the '*sensus divinitatus*'. The idea at work here is one inspired not only by Calvin but also by Aquinas and the New Testament letter of Paul to the Romans, according to which humans have a knowledge of God implanted in them by nature (although this knowledge is often confused and compromised in varying degrees).

‘Reformed Epistemology’; but these books were clearly defending SNR (i.e., Strong Noninferentialism about religious belief), though they didn’t use that label either.

The third stage of Reformed Epistemology consists of a variety of ways in which the view has been expanded and developed in greater detail since 2000. In the next section, I will briefly describe five such developments.

1.3 Five Recent Developments in Reformed Epistemology

First, the understanding of the relationship between Reformed Epistemology and traditional theistic arguments has become increasingly nuanced. Although there are supporters of Reformed Epistemology who express outright disdain for theistic arguments, the more standard approach for Reformed Epistemologists is to think of traditional theistic arguments as valuable even if not completely compelling or necessary.²⁶ The thought has been that their value lies in the assistance they provide in warding off objections to theistic belief and in showing skeptics that theism is at least a serious contender for our allegiance, given that the best arguments for it are about as compelling as philosophical arguments for controversial positions can be (which is to say, less than utterly compelling). However, a different Reformed Epistemologist perspective on theistic arguments has been developed by Stephen Evans (2010), Del Ratzsch (2003), and Plantinga (2011: ch. 8). Their suggestion is that many of the standard theistic arguments (e.g., design arguments, cosmological arguments, and moral arguments) take insights that are most powerful when they occur noninferentially and put these insights in the “inferential mode”.

²⁶ Plantinga (1983: 68-71) quotes Karl Barth as someone friendly to Reformed Epistemology who is *opposed* to reliance on theistic arguments. Plantinga’s own moderately positive (even if not entirely enthusiastic) attitude toward theistic arguments is evident in his (1986), which inspired Walls and Dougherty (2018)—a collection of papers developing two dozen (or so) theistic arguments identified in Plantinga (1986).

Consider, as a parallel, the human ability to discern the emotions of others via perception of their facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language. Beliefs formed in this way about the mental states of others are widely viewed as both noninferential and rational. If an effort were made to translate what goes on when we form perception-based beliefs about the mental states of others into argument form—perhaps as arguments meant to prove the existence of other minds undergoing specific mental states—the result would be unimpressive. It would misrepresent what actually happens, given that such beliefs are formed noninferentially rather than inferentially; and it would undervalue the epistemic quality of the beliefs so formed, given that the resulting arguments would seem so weak (due to the fact that they would be unpersuasive to skeptics about other minds). The point made by Evans, Ratzsch, and Plantinga is that something similar is going on with traditional theistic arguments. Stated as arguments, they are far from knockdown proofs of their conclusions. But the best of them capture the central insights involved in the very natural *noninferential* theistic-belief-forming tendencies highlighted by Reformed Epistemologists.

Second, the cognitive science of religion (CSR) has been viewed as a potentially useful resource for examining, supporting, critiquing, and developing Reformed Epistemology. Both CSR and Reformed Epistemology posit that belief in God or gods is instinctively and non-reflectively produced via noninferential belief-forming mechanisms that are widespread and natural in humans. But within CSR, questions remain about the origin, reliability, and purpose of a possible faculty for producing beliefs in God or gods. There are ways to build upon results in CSR to raise objections to Reformed Epistemology.²⁷ Likewise, there are ways in which the results of CSR can be accommodated by Reformed Epistemology and perhaps even used to give

²⁷ See Marsh (2013), Davis (2020), and De Cruz and De Smedt (2013).

accounts of how the belief-forming mechanisms posited by Reformed Epistemology work.²⁸

Both CSR research and the assessment of its implications for Reformed Epistemology are still in considerable flux and very much works in progress.

Third, Michael Rea has proposed an account of noninferential theistic belief formation according to which we read the mind of God via perception of the natural world in much the same way that we read the minds of other humans via perception of their bodies.²⁹ Rea points out that some perceptual experiences seem to be cognitively impacted. For example, someone who has learned to read Russian sees Cyrillic letters as meaningful whereas others might see them as meaningless squiggles; likewise, a trained ultrasound technician experiences blotches on her screen as limbs of a fetus whereas others see only the blotches. In such cognitively impacted experiences, the way one spontaneously treats one's experience is affected by more than just the raw experience itself. Sometimes the added cognitive ingredient (affecting how we treat our sensory experiences) is provided by training, as in the examples of reading Russian text or ultrasounds. Other times, the added cognitive ingredient may be hardwired into our minds as when we (even as infants) seem to discern via perception the mental states of others; this hardwiring is clearly something in addition to raw experience, given that not everyone has this hardwiring (e.g., there are those on the autism spectrum whose social-emotional agnosia prevents them from effectively discerning emotions in others, despite preserving their raw perceptual experience). Rea suggests that just as our experience of the emotional states of other (possibly immaterial) human minds is due to cognitively impacted experience of purely natural stimuli, so

²⁸ See Clark and Barrett (2010 and 2011), Murray (2009), Murray and Goldberg (2009), and Visala (2020).

²⁹ See Rea (2018: chs. 6-7, esp. pp. 130-5). Note: this analogy is *not* intended to suggest that the natural world is the body of God.

also our experience of God's mind (which provides the basis for noninferential theistic beliefs) is due to cognitively impacted experience of purely natural stimuli.

Fourth, Bergmann (2017) offers an account of how epistemic intuitions play a significant role in accounting for the rationality of both noninferential religious beliefs and objections to such beliefs. (Epistemic intuitions are seemings about epistemic value—such as rationality—much like moral intuitions are seemings about moral value.³⁰) In Plantinga's earliest work on Reformed Epistemology, he highlighted Roderick Chisholm's claim that our efforts to understand the nature of rationality are guided by the exemplars of rational belief that we have in mind when we start our theorizing: we consider examples of beliefs that strike us as rational and of beliefs that strike as irrational and we then try to identify what the former beliefs have in common that the latter beliefs lack.³¹ Plantinga pointed out that, in doing this, many theists will, quite reasonably, include their noninferential theistic beliefs among the examples of beliefs that strike them as rational.³² Bergmann (2017) emphasizes that these assessments—regarding which beliefs are rational and which aren't—play a crucial *evidential* role in responding to skeptical objections to religious belief and to disagreements on religious matters. Many (though not all) theists have epistemic intuitions, sometimes strong epistemic intuitions, in support of the rationality of their noninferential theistic beliefs. And just as skeptical objections to perception or memory or a priori intuition can be thwarted by strong epistemic intuitions in support of the rationality of noninferential perceptual, memory, and a priori beliefs, so also skeptical objections to the rationality of noninferential theistic beliefs can be undone by strong epistemic intuitions in

³⁰ See the final paragraph of section 1.1 of this chapter for a discussion of what seemings are.

³¹ Note that to say a belief strikes us as rational or irrational is to report an epistemic intuition—a seeming about epistemic value.

³² See Plantinga (1980: 59-61 and 1983: 75-8) where he makes this point, citing Chisholm (1982).

support of the rationality of such theistic beliefs.³³ With this in mind, we can see that religious disagreement is partly explained by the fact that those involved in these disputes have *different evidence*: in particular, theists often have (as relevant evidence) epistemic intuitions about theistic beliefs that are quite different from the epistemic intuitions had by those who object to theistic belief as false or irrational; so this isn't a case where all relevant evidence is shared by those on both sides of the disagreement.³⁴ Thus, an understanding of the role of epistemic intuitions had by those with noninferential religious beliefs (and of different epistemic intuitions had by those objecting to such beliefs) can shed light on the cases to be made for and against Reformed Epistemology.

Lastly, consider the recent “social turn” in religious epistemology, highlighted by the work of John Greco and others.³⁵ In the early 1990s, Linda Zagzebski worried about what she viewed as Reformed Epistemology’s individualistic emphases.³⁶ One of her concerns was that Reformed Epistemology wasn’t sensitive to the social aspects of religious belief formation. But however justified those concerns were with respect to the particular presentations of Reformed Epistemology she had in mind, it’s a mistake to think that SNR (i.e., Strong Noninferentialism about religious belief, which is how I’m understanding Reformed Epistemology in this chapter) is incompatible with treating the social nature of religious belief with full seriousness. Greco (2021: 162), for example, highlights the fact that testimony is absolutely central to religious belief formation in the Abrahamic faiths. For this reason, it is plausible to insist that any adequate religious epistemology must consider whether testimony-based religious belief can be

³³ For discussion of the way in which strong epistemic intuitions can thwart radical skepticism about perception or memory or a priori intuition, see Bergmann (2021: chs. 6-8). For discussion of a similar dynamic with respect to religious belief, see Bergmann (2017).

³⁴ For further discussion, see section 2.3 of this chapter. For an account of how conflicting epistemic intuitions of this sort play a similar role in disagreements over radical skepticism, see Bergmann (2021: ch. 12).

³⁵ See Greco (2009, 2021: ch. 9), Lackey (2017), and Zagzebski (2012).

³⁶ See Zagzebski (1993).

rational (and both Greco and Zagzebski are right that this point has not been adequately emphasized in many contemporary discussions of Reformed Epistemology). However, any epistemology of testimony allowing (as Greco's does³⁷) that, under certain conditions, *noninferential testimony-based* beliefs can be rational, can also allow that noninferential testimony-based *religious* belief can be rational, so long as the relevant conditions are satisfied. And Greco (2021: ch. 9) makes the case that the requisite conditions *can* be satisfied by such religious beliefs.

These five developments are just some of the many ways in which Reformed Epistemology has been elaborated in its third (post-2000) stage beyond what we find in the classic statements of the view offered in stage two.

2. REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY: OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

Understandably, there are many objections to Reformed Epistemology. Space limitations will allow for brief discussion of only three of the more important problems.³⁸

2.1 The Need for Independent Confirmation

It is widely believed that introspection (i.e., our ability to “look within” and tell what is going on in our own minds) can be rationally relied on without first independently verifying its reliability using other belief sources. And many think that Thomas Reid is right that perception can be

³⁷ See Greco (2021: chs 2-4).

³⁸ One of several important objections that I won't have the space to discuss in this chapter is the objection according to which Reformed Epistemology conflicts in important ways with the results of the Cognitive Science of Religion. See notes 27 and 28 for references to work on this objection and responses to it.

treated in this same way. But some belief sources are not like this. Take, for example, the practice of interpreting a set of physical symptoms as manifestations of a particular disease (in a case where this isn't obvious before recent medical advances clarified this relationship). The first objection to Reformed Epistemology says that noninferential religious belief-formation is less like introspection and perception and more like the case of belief about a disease based on perception of symptoms not obviously indicative of it.³⁹

The reply is much like Reid's reply to Descartes and Locke with respect to perception. Just as epistemic intuition convinced Reid that noninferential perceptual belief is rational without first independently verifying the reliability of perception via other belief sources, so also epistemic intuition convinces many Reformed Epistemologists that noninferential religious belief is rational without first independently verifying the reliability of our noninferential religious belief sources.⁴⁰ Moreover, as Plantinga has emphasized, if certain religions are true (which would mean that epistemically appropriate religious belief formation occurs in the way that those religions say it does—e.g., via the testimony of the Holy Spirit rather than via arguments), then having rational noninferential religious belief is exactly what we should expect.⁴¹

2.2 The Great Pumpkin Objection

The gist of this objection is that if we take seriously the Reformed Epistemologist's suggestion that there are rational noninferential religious beliefs, then (to be consistent) we should do the

³⁹ See Fales (2003) and Schellenberg (2007: ch. 8).

⁴⁰ See Bergmann (2017) for a development of this comparison. The point isn't that Reid and Reformed Epistemologists *explicitly thought of themselves* as relying on epistemic intuitions; rather, it's that they *did rely* on epistemic intuitions in the ways noted.

⁴¹ See Plantinga (2000: 188-90). For helpful modifications and improvements of this position, see Moon (2017).

same with the suggestion that there are rational noninferential beliefs in claims that are clearly ridiculous, such as the claim that the Great Pumpkin exists.⁴² And since it is clearly unacceptable to do the latter, we should refrain from taking seriously the Reformed Epistemologist's view that noninferential religious beliefs can be rational. This can be a tricky objection to get right; I won't take the time here to dig into the various ways of understanding it.⁴³ Suffice it to say that it's in the same neighborhood as objections to commonsensist responses to radical skepticism that say: "if we claim that perceptual beliefs are noninferentially rational, apart from any independent verification of their reliability, then (to be consistent) we would have to take seriously those who defend in a similar way beliefs formed via crystal ball gazing".⁴⁴

Once this parallel is made clear, however, we can see a way for the Reformed Epistemologist to reply to the Great Pumpkin objection. Those defending commonsense endorsement of perception in the face of the "crystal ball" objection can say that even if defenders of crystal ball gazing can make philosophical moves exactly parallel to those of the commonsensist, commonsensists about perception have no good reason to take those defenses of crystal ball gazing seriously. It's true that the *form* of the reply is the same in each case. But the difference is that (in the normal circumstances in which we typically find ourselves) it is not rational for commonsensists to take seriously such a defense of crystal ball gazing whereas it is rational for them to take seriously such a defense of perception; this is something they can determine via reliance on their epistemic intuitions about these cases. Similarly, the Reformed

⁴² In Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* comic strip, the character Linus believes in the Great Pumpkin, a supernatural being with (presumably) the appearance of a large pumpkin who, after rising from the "most sincere" pumpkin patch, delivers gifts to well-behaved children around Halloween.

⁴³ See Plantinga (1983: 74-8 & 2000: 342-51), Martin (1990: 266-76), and DeRose (unpublished). I'm not convinced that the difference DeRose highlights (between the allegedly easy-to-handle version of the objection that Plantinga considers and the more difficult version of the objection that DeRose lays out) amounts to a significant difference. At any rate, replies along the lines sketched below are just as effective for either version and they are in the same vein as replies suggested by Plantinga.

⁴⁴ See Sosa (1997) and Bergmann (2008) for a discussion of this sort of objection to commonsensism.

Epistemologist's reply to the Great Pumpkin objection is that whereas the *form* of the defense of noninferential belief in the Great Pumpkin is the same as form of the Reformed Epistemologist's defense of noninferential theistic belief, it is not rational for Reformed Epistemologists to take seriously such a defense of belief in the Great Pumpkin whereas it is rational for them to take seriously such a defense of theistic belief. Once again, this is something they can determine via reliance on their epistemic intuitions about these cases.⁴⁵

A more nuanced reply could grant that, under the right circumstances, the defender of Great Pumpkin beliefs and the Reformed Epistemologist (as well as the radical skeptic and the commonsensist about perception) could all have beliefs that are *internally rational*, where that means that the beliefs are epistemically appropriate responses to the believers' circumstances or evidence (which includes their seemings and epistemic intuitions). But this more nuanced reply could then insist that the relevant beliefs of Great Pumpkin followers and of radical skeptics are not *externally rational* in the way that the beliefs of Reformed Epistemologists and commonsensists about perception are. This is because to be externally rational involves being internally rational *and* being based on the sorts of evidence that one epistemically *should* have (including appropriate seemings and epistemic intuitions); and committed defenders of radical skepticism and of Great Pumpkin beliefs don't have the sorts of evidence they epistemically should have.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Obviously radical skeptics have different epistemic intuitions about perception than commonsensists do; likewise, believers in the Great Pumpkin, if there were any, might have different epistemic intuitions about belief in the Great Pumpkin than your average theistic Reformed Epistemologist does. In addition, nontheists typically have different epistemic intuitions about noninferential theistic belief than do Reformed Epistemologists whose confidently-held noninferential theistic beliefs strongly seem to them to be rational. Dealing with this sort of disagreement is the focus of section 2.3 of this chapter and of Bergmann (2017 & 2021: ch. 12).

⁴⁶ For further discussion of internal and external rationality, see Plantinga (2000: 110-12) and Bergmann (2017 & 2021: ch. 12).

2.3 The Problem of Peer Disagreement

The problem of peer disagreement focuses on your epistemic peers—i.e., those whose evidence is approximately as good as yours and who respond to evidence approximately as well as you do. The concern is that if those who appear to be your epistemic peers when forming beliefs on religious matters hold beliefs incompatible with your own, this suggests not only that one of you is mistaken but also that you have a defeater for these beliefs of yours. After all, given that the two of you are epistemic peers, how can be sure that it is the one who disagrees with you (and not you) that is mistaken? In the context of Reformed Epistemology, the worry is that even if it's possible to have noninferential religious beliefs that are initially rational, this rationality is defeated upon recognizing that our epistemic peers disagree with us on religious topics (many times over).⁴⁷

One way to reply to this objection is to start by considering other cases where we (seemingly rationally) maintain our beliefs in the face of disagreement. For example, consider disagreements about radical skepticism. Commonsensists notice that our strong epistemic intuitions in support of the rationality of our ordinary perceptual and memory beliefs seem to conflict with weaker epistemic intuitions in support of premises used in arguments for radical skepticism—premises saying what is required for a belief to be rational. Commonsensists think the rational thing to do in this situation is to maintain our ordinary perceptual and memory beliefs (and the epistemic intuitions that they are rational) and to reject the arguments for radical skepticism based on those weaker epistemic intuitions; those who think such commonsense responses fail and that the challenge of radical skepticism remains forceful disagree. There are

⁴⁷ See Goldberg (2014 & 2021) and Schellenberg (2007: ch. 8).

two points that apply to both this example, concerning disagreement about commonsense responses to radical skepticism, and the case of religious disagreement. First, it's doubtful that the people who disagree in these examples have equally good evidence and are responding to such evidence equally well. After all, they don't have the same (or equally non-misleading) epistemic intuitions about the rationality of holding noninferential perceptual beliefs or noninferential religious beliefs. Or if they do, they aren't equally good at responding to that evidence (given how differently they respond). Second, even if they initially thought of each other as peers, their discovery of their disagreement can provide evidence that they aren't peers after all.⁴⁸ Both points remove the sting of this sort of disagreement-based objection to noninferential religious belief. For it's widely accepted that disagreement with those who *aren't our peers*—in particular, with those whose evidence is worse or who aren't responding as well to their evidence—needn't result in a defeater.

Again, there are other important objections to Reformed Epistemology not considered here. Moreover, there is much more to say (pro and con) both about the three objections that were considered here and about the replies to them that were mentioned. But this will have to suffice for the purposes of this chapter.⁴⁹

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⁴⁸ For discussion of this kind of response to the objection from peer disagreement to noninferential religious belief, see Bergmann (2015 & 2017).

⁴⁹ Thanks to Jeffrey Brower, John Greco, and Tyler McNabb for comments on previous drafts.

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