



Analyzing the Significance of Reformed Epistemology: A Critical Review of Criticism of Evidentialism and its Implications for Evangelical Apologetics

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ABSTRACT

Reformed Epistemology (RE) is one of the most significant developments in the philosophy of religion of the 20th and 21st centuries. This article analyzes the significance of Reformed Epistemology, focusing on its critique of evidentialism and its implications for the practice of evangelical apologetics. Through a critical literature review approach, this paper will outline the core arguments of Reformed Epistemology, particularly the thesis of "properly basic belief" in religious faith. The analysis will focus on the perspective of John D. Laing, who examines the triangular relationship between Reformed Epistemology, evidentialism, and apologetics. The article's findings demonstrate that Reformed Epistemology's significance lies in its ability to provide a legitimate epistemic foundation for religious belief without relying on propositional evidence, while simultaneously opening up space for a model of apologetics that is more testimonial and relies on the work of the Holy Spirit, rather than solely rationalistic. However, Reformed Epistemology has also drawn criticism for its potential fideism and its challenges to interfaith dialogue.

INTRODUCTION

Reformed Epistemology (RE) emerged as a serious challenge to the dominant view in modern philosophy of religion, which often requires that belief in God must be based on sufficient evidence or argument to be considered rational. This school of thought is rooted in the Reformed theological tradition, specifically in the thought of John Calvin with his doctrine of *sensus divinitatis*, and was developed philosophically by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Plantinga & Wolterstorff, 2025).

The significance of the Reformed Epistemology project cannot be overstated. It not only revolutionized the discussion of the rationality of religious belief but also had profound implications for the practice of Christian apologetics, particularly the evangelical tradition that has long struggled with an evidentialist approach. This article aims to analyze the significance of the study of Reformed Epistemology by reviewing its main arguments, particularly through the lens of the analysis conducted by John D. Laing. Laing provides a sharp framework for understanding how Reformed Epistemology interacts with, and challenges evidentialism, and what consequences it has for evangelical apologetics (Craig, 2025). The question raised is: How does Reformed Epistemology analyze and critique evidentialism, and what is the significance of this critique for the form and practice of contemporary evangelical apologetics? This article will answer this question by first exploring the study of Reformed Epistemology, then analyzing its significance according to Laing's perspective, and finally drawing conclusions regarding the contributions and limitations of Reformed Epistemology.

METHODS

The research method used is a literature study (library research) with a theological philosophical approach (Wahid, 2021). The analysis techniques used are critical analysis and argument analysis to map the logical structure, weaknesses and strengths of each position. The stages of analysis are as follows, starting from the exposition of RE's argument against evidentialism. Second, identify points of criticism from the side of evidentialism. Third, evaluate criticism based on its logical coherence and relevance to apologetics. And the fourth is the synthesis of implications for evangelical apologetics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reformed Studies of Epistemology: The Core of the Argument and Its Development

The essence of *Reformed Epistemology* can be summarized in its central thesis: belief in God can be epistemologically "*properly basic*" (Yoan, 2024). This means that this belief can be accepted rationally without having to be inferred from evidence or other beliefs. Plantinga analogizes this to our other basic beliefs, such as the belief in the existence of *other minds*, or the belief that the past world really existed. We hold these beliefs not because we have irrefutable evidence, but because we are in a certain circumstance that makes the formation of such beliefs appropriate and rational. For RE, this "certain circumstance" for belief in God is explained through the theory of *sensus divinitatis* adopted from Calvin. *Sensus divinitatis* is an innate cognitive faculty of man that, under the right conditions, directly results in belief in God. When these faculties are functioning as they should (which in Plantinga terminology is called *properly functioning*), the confidence it generates is warranted.

From here, RE launched his most famous critique of *evidentialism*. Evidentialism, in the context of religious philosophy, is the view that religious beliefs are not epistemically justified unless they are supported by sufficient evidence. Plantinga argues that this evidentialist claim itself is unfounded. He declared, "Evidentialists propose impossible conditions... and then, because belief in God does not satisfy it, they conclude that belief in God has no epistemic justification." This criticism is known as "critique of criticism" (*the critique of classical foundationalism*), in which the RE points out that the principles of evidentialism alone cannot meet the standards they set. The study of Reformed Epistemology has two foundations as follows.

The first foundation is the historical-theological foundation: the census of *divinity* and the Calvinian legacy. Reformed *Epistemology* (RE) thought did not emerge in a vacuum; it was grounded in the Reformed tradition, specifically John Calvin's idea of the census *divinitatis*. In this context, *sensus divinitatis* is understood as a cognitive capacity (or spiritual disposition) that normally allows humans to perceive or produce belief in God's existence without the need for first propositional evidence. This historical emphasis is important because RE is not just a contemporary epistemological strategy, but a continuation of a theological tradition that places religious experience as the subject of epistemic discourse (Plantinga, 2000, p. 172). The implication of his study is that placing the *divinitatis* census as a starting point allows analysts to treat religious beliefs as cognitive phenomena that have historical-theological origins, so that the epistemic evaluation must consider the context of cognitive function and the theological norms that underlie it, not just the demands of evidentialist evidence (Plantinga, 1981). The second foundation is centered on Plantinga's epistemic theory: *Properly basic beliefs* and *proper function*. The core of Plantinga's theory adopted by RE are two central concepts: (1) that some beliefs can be properly basic, i.e. feasible, rational, and do not require proportional proof of other beliefs; and (2) that *warrant* requires that beliefs be generated by a properly functioning

cognition in an appropriate epistemic environment. This framework shifts the focus from propositional evidence to the analysis of the cognitive states and epistemic functions that produce beliefs (Plantinga, 1981). By assessing *warrant* through *proper function*, Plantinga opens up the possibility that religious beliefs can have an epistemic status equivalent to other basic beliefs, such as *other minds*, so that *evidentialist* demands that require additional propositional evidence are inadequate as the sole benchmark of religious rationality. However, this approach requires clarification of criteria: what counts as "proper function" (normal vs. pathological cognitive system), and how to distinguish a function that is truly truth-oriented from a function that merely inspires confidence (Plantinga, 2000, p.172).

The Significance of Reformed Epistemology According to John D. Laing: Altered Apologetics

Reformed Epistemology (RE) has become one of the most significant movements in the philosophy of religion of the 20th and 21st centuries. Pioneered by Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and William Alston, this movement challenged the claims of logical positivism and offered a defense of the rationality of religious beliefs, particularly Christian beliefs, without relying on classical evidentialist arguments (Alvin Plantinga, 2015, p. 35-40). In the contemporary RE discussion landscape, John D. Laing emerges as a theologian and philosopher who carefully articulates the significance and implications of RE, particularly for the practice of apologetics.

According to Laing, RE is not just an abstract philosophical theory, but a paradigm that fundamentally changes the approach of Christian apologetics from a project that seeks to prove God to a practice that describes the reasonableness and basis of Christian beliefs in the context of ordinary human experience (Laing, 2018, p.281). This literature review will explore how Laing understood the significance of RE and how this understanding resulted in a modified form of apologetics, with reference to Laing's own works and his dialogues with other thinkers.

The core of RE lies in its rejection of classical "evidentialism" and "foundationalism". RE thinkers argue that belief in God can be properly held "properly", that is, it does not have to be inferred from other, more fundamental beliefs, just like our belief in other people's thoughts or past existence (Plantinga, 2000, p. 41). Such basic beliefs are formed by "faculties" or appropriately functioning cognitive mechanisms, which in the context of religious belief, are often referred to as *sensus divinitatis* (feelings of divinity) triggered by various experiences (Alvin Plantinga, 2015, p. 52-55)

John D. Laing builds on this foundation by emphasizing the rationality and warrant aspects of Christian belief. In his work, Laing seeks to show that RE provides a strong framework for maintaining Christian beliefs in a pluralistic society without having to fall into foundationalism that he considers problematic (John D. Laing, 2018, P. 145). Laing argues that Christian claims are neither less rational nor less grounded than other fundamental beliefs held by humans. The significance of RE, for Laing, is that it shifts the burden of proof from the believer to the skeptic. The challenge is no longer to prove that God exists, but for the skeptic to show why the *sensus divinitatis* or the cognitive mechanism that produces belief in God is not credible (Laing, 2018, p. 285).

The main significance of RE according to Laing lies in the transformation it produces in the practice of apologetics. In his seminal article, Laing states that RE transforms apologetics from an approach that focuses on "*evidence*" to one that focuses on "*testimony*" and "*explanatory adequacy*" (Laing, 2018, p. 279). *First*, RE apologetics no longer begins with complex philosophical arguments for the existence of God, but with describing the reasonableness of ordinary religious experience. Laing, following Plantinga, argues that if belief in God is properly basic, then the first apologetical task is to show how this belief arises naturally and reliably in human cognitive structures, not to deduce such beliefs from neutral premises (Laing, 2018, p. 287). It is a shift from propositional apologetics to psychological or phenomenological apologetics.

Second, Laing emphasized the role of faith communities in shaping basic beliefs. RE does not advocate a radical individualistic epistemology. In contrast, basic beliefs are often formed and reinforced in the context of communities that provide the "doctrines of control" that guide the formation of beliefs (Smith &, 2021, p. 60). Thus, apologetics also turns into a coherent and living presentation of the life and testimony of the Christian community, in which belief in God functions meaningfully. *Third*, Laing sees RE as a powerful tool to counter the naturalistic narratives that dominate public discussion. By rejecting the evidentialist demands that often presuppose metaphysical naturalism, RE opens up space for theistic explanations to be considered as legitimate and even more adequate explanations for reality, for example in exploring the phenomena of consciousness, moral existence, and natural order (Laing, 2018, p. 290-91). Apologetics became a project of demonstrating the "warrant" of the entire Christian belief system, known as the "*Extended A/C Model*" by Plantinga, which was adopted and developed by Laing (DePoe, 2021, p. 45).

Laing's understanding of RE is inseparable from criticism, and his response to these criticisms further clarifies his position. One of the main criticisms is that RE can lead to blind faith-acceptance fideism without rational support (Feser, 2017, p. 15). Laing firmly denied these accusations. He argues that RE is not anti-ratio; He only rejects certain forms of rationality (classical foundationalist). Basic beliefs, for him, are subject to internal criteria of coherence and conformity with evidence, and can be supported by secondary arguments (Laing, 2018, p. 283). simply affirms that such arguments are not *the* primary source of belief.

Another criticism is that RE cannot distinguish between conflicting religious beliefs, a problem known as "*the problem of religious pluralism*" (DePoe, 2021, p. 102-152). Laing acknowledged the power of this challenge. The response is to acknowledge that RE, as an epistemological theory, may not directly resolve conflicts between competing truth claims. However, it serves to neutralize skeptical claims that Christian beliefs are inherently irrational. The resolution of conflicts between beliefs then shifts to the realm of more substantive philosophical, theological, and historical arguments a realm in which Laing believes Christianity has rich resources (Laing, 2018, p. 294). John D. Laing, in his book "*Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology, Evidentialism, and Evangelical Apologetics*," explores specifically the significance of RE to the evangelical community. According to Laing, the significance of the RE lies in two things: as an effective critique of the paradigm of apologetics that relies too much on evidence, and as a catalyst for the development of an apologetic model that is more in line with Reformed theology.

The Significance of Reformed Epistemology According to John D. Laing, there are several criticisms that need to be understood as follows. The first is RE's Critique of *Evidentialism*: The structure of the argument and the weaknesses of *evidentialism*. RE proposes a "critique of criticism" against evidentialism: instead of upholding that all beliefs must be based on propositional evidence, Plantinga points out that the claim itself requires justification and cannot be treated as a priori principle without a functional evaluation of the sources of belief. In other words, evidenceialism tends to assume standards that cannot be universally enforced, because many of the basic everyday beliefs we hold are not based on propositional evidence (Plantinga, 1981, p. 48). This argument effectively highlights the theoretical inconsistencies in evidentialism, i.e. demanding evidence from beliefs that are epistemically treated as the basis in many domains. But the RE criticism does not automatically shut out all evidentialist criticism; questions remain about how RE responds to cases where the "census" results in

beliefs that are clearly wrong (e.g., collective delusions, destructive ideologies). Therefore, additional work is needed: differential criteria between *properly functioning* census and cognitive error, such as empirical verification, *coherence checks*, moral/transformational consistency (Wykstra, 1989). The second is the Critique of the Hegemony of *Evidentialism* in Apologetics. Laing observes that many traditional evangelical apologetics, while very valuable, often adopt an evidentialist framework. They seek to prove the existence of God, the reliability of the Bible, or the resurrection of Jesus through the accumulation of historical and philosophical evidence. While this effort is legitimate and useful, RE warns that over-reliance on it carries risks. The risk is to imply that faith is only rational if these proofs are successful, thus making it vulnerable to any philosophical or historical objections that arise. RE, according to Laing, frees believers from this burden. By affirming that belief in God is *properly basic*, RE provides a solid epistemic basis that does not depend on the success or failure of complex philosophical arguments. This does not render the arguments useless, but puts them in the right position: as secondary support (*confirmatory*) rather than primary foundations (Laing, 2018).

Another significance of Reformed Epistemology According to John D. Laing: Transformed Apologetics is the existence of a new paradigm for Evangelical Apologetics. The practical significance of the RE, according to Laing's analysis, is that it paved the way for different forms of apologetics. Instead of apologetics centered on propositions and evidence, RE pushes in several opinions.

First, apologetics testimonials. The emphasis shifted from "proving God" to "telling the experience of God." If religious beliefs are fundamentally formed through experience (*sensus divinitatis*), then sharing personal testimony about God's work in one's life becomes a very powerful and direct form of apologetics. Second, Apologetics That Depend on the Holy Spirit. RE is in harmony with the Reformed doctrine of the Holy Spirit's work in regeneration and enlightenment. Proper conviction is not the result of irrefutable arguments, but of the work of the Holy Spirit that makes *the divinitatis census* work again. The role of the apologist is not to "win" an argument, but to be the instrument that the Holy Spirit uses in the process.

Third, the rejection of Simple Fideism. Laing also notes that RE is not fideism (blind faith). Fideism rejects the use of reason at all. In contrast, RE is a sophisticated epistemological position that uses reason to show the limits of reason and the scope of legitimate basic beliefs. He defends the rationality of faith, though not in the way that the evidentialists demand.

The Implications of Apologetics: From Evidentialism to a Pneumatological Approach

John D. Laing's analysis confirms two main practical implications for evangelical apologetics: *First*, the RE proposes a shift in focus from the attempt at "*propositional proof*" to the recognition of religious experience as apologetic. *Second*, RE opens up space for the role of the Holy Spirit (pneumatology) in the process of faith formation and apologetic communication. Laing emphasizes that philosophical arguments remain useful, but more as secondary justifications than primary foundations that determine the rationality of faith (Laing, 2018, p. 778).

From a practical perspective, this influences the strategy by which apologetics becomes more narrative/testimonial, i.e. narrating transformational and pastoral experiences, facilitating the conditions under which the *census divinitatis* can "function", rather than just a logical argument. However, this approach must maintain a balance to avoid fideism, rejecting reason altogether, while not demeaning the role of reason and historical evidence, a balance that Laing notes as characteristic of RE (Laing, 2018, p.782).

One of the most pressing epistemic questions is to distinguish authentic religious claims from similar claims but are false or come from non-theistic sources. RE itself acknowledges this vulnerability, that the *census* can be 'malfunctioning' and that similar claims from other religious traditions require discriminatory criteria. Therefore, the study

RE needs to enrich itself with phenomenological analysis of religious experience, moral-theological criteria, such as the fruit of transformation, and comparative dialogue between religions. For both theoretical and practical purposes, it is recommended to develop a multi-criteria evaluative framework: (a) internal consistency of experience; (b) compatibility with the tradition of revelation; (c) moral and transformational impacts; (d) resistance to external epistemic corrections (e.g., historical evidence). This kind of integration helps to overcome accusations of fideism while providing a tool for more rational inter-religious dialogue.

CONCLUSION

Based on the above analysis, it can be concluded that the significance of the study of Reformed Epistemology is multidimensional. Philosophically, RE succeeded in destabilizing the hegemony of evidentialism by showing that religious beliefs can be properly basic and warranted. Theologically, the RE provides a solid epistemic foundation for the Christian faith that is in harmony with the doctrine of the *divinitatis census* and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Through the lens of John D. Laing, the practical significance of the RE for evangelical apologetics becomes abundantly clear. RE serves as a healthy correction to the tendency to make faith the conclusion of a philosophical argument. Instead, RE empowers believers to hold their beliefs confidently, while also opening up space for more narrative, testimonial, and divine-dependent models of apologetics. However, it is important to recognize that RE is not a perfect solution; Challenges remain, for example in distinguishing true beliefs from the divinitatis census from false beliefs, and in responding to similar claims from other religions. Nevertheless, his contribution in enriching and reforming the discourse of religious philosophy and evangelical apologetics remains invaluable.

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