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# Plantinga and the Great Pumpkin Revisited from the Perspective of Epistemology of Disagreement

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## Abstract

The epistemic legitimacy of religious belief, as defended within the framework of Reformed Epistemology (RE), has been the subject of sustained scrutiny since Alvin Plantinga introduced the notion of a *sensus divinitatis* as a properly basic source of theistic belief. While the model purports to secure warrant without evidential support, its normative adequacy becomes contentious when considered in light of recent developments in the epistemology of disagreement. Persistent epistemic parity between dissenting interlocutors, particularly among intellectually and morally serious peers, presents a form of higher-order evidence that cannot be easily deflected by appeals to internal proper function alone. Furthermore, RE's structural exclusion of dissenting perspectives – by regarding them as the product of cognitive malfunction or noetic effects of sin – risks epistemic insularity and violates principles of epistemic humility and testimonial justice. The analysis draws on debates concerning epistemic responsibility, the asymmetry of religious deference, and the fragility of internalist warrant under conditions of deep disagreement. In pluralistic contexts where dialogical symmetry is morally and epistemically required, the RE model struggles to sustain its claim to epistemic privilege without collapsing into circularity or dogmatism.

Original Research

## Keywords

reformed epistemology, *sensus divinitatis*, epistemology of disagreement, higher-order evidence, epistemic responsibility.

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## Introduction

Alvin Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology (RE) has been one of the most influential attempts in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion to articulate a model under which religious belief, and in particular belief in God, can be epistemically warranted even in the absence of propositional evidence or argument. Against classical evidentialism and internalist standards of justification, Plantinga offers a robust externalist alternative that grounds warrant in the proper function of cognitive faculties designed by God. For theistic belief, the key epistemic faculty is the *sensus divinitatis*–a divinely implanted capacity that, under the right conditions, naturally produces belief in God. On this view, belief in God can be properly basic and warranted, provided that it arises from properly functioning faculties in a congenial epistemic environment, and is not defeated by counter-evidence.

While this model has found resonance among many religious epistemologists, it has also attracted vigorous criticism. Among the most enduring and notorious objections is Michael Martin's so-called *Great Pumpkin Objection* (GPO), which charges that the epistemic criteria used by Plantinga are too permissive and could be equally invoked to justify belief in any entity–say, the Great Pumpkin, Santa Claus, or a tribal deity–so long as the belief arises from a putatively reliable faculty. If the *sensus divinitatis* can produce warrant for Christian belief, then why not a *sensus cucurbitae* that justifies belief in the Great Pumpkin? Plantinga's defenders have typically dismissed this objection as unserious, claiming that it misconstrues the epistemic constraints of proper function and design plan. However, the persistence of the objection in the literature indicates that it touches a deeper nerve–namely, the challenge of epistemic arbitrariness and indistinguishability.

One of the earliest and most sustained critiques of the *sensus divinitatis* comes from Michael Martin, who argued that the alleged faculty is epistemically unreliable and indistinguishable from self-deceptive psychological impulses. According to Martin, religious experiences or seeming perceptions of God fail to meet basic standards of intersubjective verification and are thus no more authoritative than the experiences of those claiming to hear alien voices or mystical auras (Martin, 1990, pp. 272–75). While Plantinga attempts to sidestep such concerns by invoking proper function and the design plan, Martin's objection remains relevant when assessed in light of higher-order evidence and religious disagreement. It reinforces the idea that RE's

epistemic framework is not immune to skeptical symmetry.

In this paper, I argue that the Great Pumpkin Objection, far from being a parody or strawman, raises a structurally serious challenge to RE when considered in light of recent developments in the epistemology of disagreement. I aim to reconstruct the objection in a more charitable and philosophically rigorous form, showing that it effectively exposes a core weakness in Plantinga's model–its failure to accommodate epistemic peer disagreement and to provide publicly accessible standards for the assessment of belief-forming mechanisms. This failure, I suggest, constitutes a form of epistemic exceptionalism: the view that one's own belief-forming practices are beyond critique or need not be held to the same standards as others'.

To make this case, I draw on recent work in social epistemology and the epistemology of disagreement, particularly by Richard Feldman (2006), David Christensen (2007), Jonathan Matheson (2015), and John Pittard (2019), as well as Plantinga's own writings and defenses. My claim is not that belief in God cannot be warranted, but rather that Plantinga's model cannot account for the epistemic obligations generated by disagreement with epistemic peers–those who are equally informed, intelligent, and sincere but hold different or contrary beliefs. In ignoring or deflecting the significance of such disagreement, RE violates what Pittard has called "epistemic integrity"–a virtue that demands openness to critique and a willingness to re-evaluate one's beliefs in light of serious opposition (Pittard, 2019, pp. 22–27).

The structure of the paper is as follows. In the next section, I provide a focused reconstruction of Plantinga's model of warrant and the proper function account, with particular attention to the internal structure of the *sensus divinitatis* as a source of basic belief. I show how Plantinga's criteria for warrant deliberately sidestep internalist demands for reflection, coherence, and evidence-sharing, in favor of a biologically and theologically naturalized model of belief-formation. In the third section, I revisit the Great Pumpkin Objection, not as satire but as a genuine epistemic test: What distinguishes a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis* from a delusional or culturally idiosyncratic cognitive mechanism? In the fourth section, I engage with the literature on peer disagreement and higher-order evidence, arguing that the real problem with RE is not its proper basicality thesis, but its refusal to admit that serious disagreement can constitute an epistemic defeater–even when no argument or evidence decisively settles the matter.

The fifth section brings these strands together by showing that RE's

insularity from disagreement reflects an implicit rejection of epistemic reciprocity, and thus fails to meet the norms of justification in pluralistic epistemic communities. I argue that the integrity of belief, especially in the domain of religion, requires not only proper function but also dialogical accountability. If religious epistemology is to maintain philosophical credibility, it must speak not only to insiders, but also to those outside the belief system, and be willing to offer intelligible reasons for its claims. This, I suggest, is where RE falters: It licenses conviction without dialogue, and thereby undermines the very idea of warrant as a normative status that can be publicly assessed and contested.

The reconstructed Great Pumpkin Objection, then, is not merely a reductio ad absurdum but a challenge to epistemic closure. It urges that any adequate account of warrant must include not only first-order reliability but also second-order responsiveness to disagreement. The value of this objection lies not in its mockery but in its demand for integrity. In a religiously pluralistic and epistemically contested world, beliefs must be more than sincere–they must be justifiable to others who, in good faith, believe differently.

## Plantinga's epistemology of warrant: proper function and the internal logic of the *sensus divinitatis*

Alvin Plantinga's model of warrant, as developed in *Warrant and Proper Function* (1993) and culminating in *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000), represents a sophisticated attempt to ground the epistemic legitimacy of religious belief in an externalist framework that bypasses classical evidentialist constraints. Plantinga argues that a belief is warranted–not merely justified–if it is produced by cognitive faculties that are functioning properly, in an appropriate epistemic environment, according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth. This model of warrant is teleological and functionalist: It is not the agent's access to reasons or coherence among beliefs that generates warrant, but the reliability and normal operation of belief-producing mechanisms.

Central to this account in the context of religious belief is the *sensus divinitatis*, a cognitive faculty allegedly installed in humans by God, which–when not impeded by sin, cultural suppression, or epistemic malfunction–naturally and spontaneously produces belief in God. Importantly, the beliefs produced by this faculty are taken to be basic in the sense that they are not inferred from other beliefs or justified by

evidence but are epistemically immediate. On Plantinga's view, these beliefs can nevertheless be warranted if the underlying cognitive system meets the proper functional conditions.

To understand the epistemological stakes of this view, we must first note its deliberate rejection of internalist standards. Plantinga does not claim that belief in God is inferentially justified or based on shared evidence; in fact, he rejects classical foundationalist accounts of justification, such as those promoted by Locke or Chisholm. Instead, he reconfigures the notion of rationality around the idea of proper function–a concept that is neither reducible to evolutionary psychology nor to subjective coherence. For Plantinga, the notion of a design plan is not metaphorical: It refers explicitly to God's intentional creation of human cognitive architecture. Hence, proper function is normative not in virtue of abstract epistemic standards but because it reflects divine intentionality.

Such a view has clear theological appeal for those already within the Reformed tradition or those inclined to accept a theistic metaphysic. However, the philosophical cost of this model is high. First, it implies that epistemic warrant is irreducibly theistic: No naturalized or secular epistemology can fully account for the norms governing belief formation. Second, and more crucially for our purposes, the model appears to license belief systems that are epistemically isolated from external critique. Since the criteria for proper function are themselves indexed to a particular theistic worldview, there is no independent way to assess whether a faculty is in fact functioning properly unless one already accepts that worldview. In short, the account appears epistemically closed.

Plantinga attempts to mitigate this concern by emphasizing the importance of defeaters. He acknowledges that even properly basic beliefs can lose their warrant if the subject encounters a defeater–a belief that, if accepted, undermines the rationality of the original belief. However, he insists that such defeaters must themselves be evaluated within the same proper function framework. This move creates a closed-loop structure: One's belief in God is warranted if it arises from the *sensus divinitatis*, and any putative defeater of this belief is defeated in turn if it fails to cohere with the proper functioning of the believer's total noetic structure.

This framework raises the question: What happens when a person is presented with epistemic disagreement from peers–individuals who are equally intelligent, well-informed, and reflective, but who reject belief

in God? Does such disagreement constitute a defeater? Plantinga's answer is essentially negative. He argues that since non-theists do not share the same design plan (or at least are operating under a suppressed or dysfunctional *sensus divinitatis*), their disagreement does not carry the same evidential weight. In effect, only those within the theistic framework count as relevant epistemic peers for the purposes of evaluating defeaters.

This position, while internally consistent, is highly problematic from the standpoint of epistemic pluralism. It restricts the scope of peer disagreement to those who share one's fundamental metaphysical commitments, thereby excluding precisely those cases where disagreement is most epistemologically significant. Furthermore, it transforms what ought to be a challenge to belief into an opportunity for theological diagnosis: The atheist is not a rational peer but a victim of cognitive malfunction or moral corruption.

To make this clearer, consider the structure of justification at work here. Plantinga's model asserts:

Belief in God is properly basic and produced by the *sensus divinitatis*.

The *sensus divinitatis* is a faculty functioning according to God's design plan.

1. The output of this faculty is warranted unless defeated.
2. Testimonies of non-belief do not count as defeaters unless the subject judges them to be credible.

Since the *sensus divinitatis* itself testifies to the truth of belief in God, such testimonies typically do not generate credible defeaters.

This structure is epistemically self-protective: It generates warrant internally and deflects external challenge unless one is already disposed to doubt the reliability of the *sensus divinitatis*. But this means that the system offers no non-question-begging response to alternative religious or nonreligious frameworks–a point that will become central in our reconstruction of the Great Pumpkin Objection.

One way to assess the strength of Plantinga's epistemology is to ask how it would deal with symmetrical claims arising from different cognitive traditions. Suppose, for instance, that an adherent of a different religious tradition–say, a devout Hindu–claims to possess a properly functioning cognitive faculty (*sensus Vishnuatis*) that reliably

produces belief in Vishnu under appropriate conditions. If the structure of that belief-forming mechanism mirrors the *sensus divinitatis* in Plantinga's model–that is, it is spontaneous, non-inferential, persistent under reflection, and central to the believer's epistemic life–then what reason does Plantinga have to privilege one over the other?

Plantinga might respond by pointing to the truth-aimed nature of the design plan: The *sensus divinitatis* is properly functioning because it was designed by God to produce true beliefs. But this response presupposes the very theism that the belief is supposed to warrant. The result is epistemic circularity, or what Keith DeRose (2000) has called *epistemic blinders*: a system so structured that it renders itself immune to challenge by simply dismissing rival systems as defective or externally unmoored.

Plantinga acknowledges the apparent circularity of the RE model but suggests that such circularity is "not vicious" if the model is in fact true. He writes: "If Christian belief is true, then indeed the beliefs involved will be warranted... and the circularity involved in appealing to them is not objectionable" (Plantinga, 2000, p. 499). Yet from an external perspective–especially in the context of epistemic disagreement – this amounts to a form of *epistemic bootstrapping*, where the reliability of a belief-forming process is justified by its own deliverances. Such reasoning remains deeply problematic when applied across religious divides.

Keith DeRose's discussion of *Direct Warrant Realism* (DWR) raises an important question about whether immediate justification can persist in the face of peer disagreement. While DWR allows for a kind of non-inferential warrant, DeRose himself acknowledges that the presence of a competent peer who disagrees – even without presenting counter-evidence – can be sufficient to undermine one's warrant (DeRose, 2004, pp. 40–43). In this light, the RE model appears especially fragile, since it not only insists on immediate warrant via the *sensus divinitatis*, but also systematically excludes the epistemic status of dissenters from its model. This renders the model epistemically insular and asymmetrically immune to challenge.

The circularity becomes even more problematic in light of what has come to be known in literature as the problem of peer disagreement. As Feldman and Christensen have argued (Feldman, 2006; Christensen, 2007), when two equally competent, rational agents assess the same body of evidence and arrive at contrary conclusions, there is a prima facie obligation to revisit one's own beliefs. Even if one does not immediately relinquish those beliefs, epistemic humility and conciliatory revision are

often required. On Plantinga's model, however, such disagreement does not even rise to the level of a relevant epistemic consideration, because the model already assumes that the believer's faculties are functioning properly and that disagreement is attributable to dysfunction elsewhere.

This deflection is not merely a theoretical quirk; it has practical implications for how epistemic communities engage with pluralism. If one holds that one's belief-forming mechanisms are authoritative simply because of their internal phenomenology and theological pedigree, then one effectively denies the public assessability of epistemic warrant. As Jonathan Matheson (2015) emphasizes, one of the key insights of contemporary epistemology is that rationality is not merely a matter of internal coherence or subjective confidence, but of responsiveness to disagreement and external critique. Beliefs that are immune to such responsiveness may retain psychological certainty, but they lose epistemic credibility.

Moreover, Plantinga's own appeal to defeaters ultimately collapses into a kind of internalist fideism. A belief, on his model, is only defeated if the agents *themselves* judge the counterevidence to be compelling. But such self-assessment is notoriously prone to bias, especially in matters of deep personal or religious commitment. As Pittard (2019, pp. 67–70) notes, "epistemic integrity requires more than just being internally consistent; it requires a willingness to allow that the testimony of one's peers may, in certain contexts, be epistemically disruptive in a way that demands real reconsideration."

To bring this point into sharper relief, we can draw on Pittard's account of higher-order evidence – information not about the world directly, but about the reliability of one's own cognitive processes. Suppose a Christian theist learns that equally intelligent, morally upright, and reflective individuals from other traditions hold incompatible beliefs with similar strength and conviction. This fact itself constitutes higher-order evidence that the *sensus divinitatis* may not be uniquely reliable. Plantinga's model, however, offers no principled way to incorporate such higher-order evidence unless one already suspects malfunction, which again renders the model epistemically insulated.

This insulation is what the Great Pumpkin Objection, properly understood, seeks to expose. The core insight of Martin's parody is not that belief in the Great Pumpkin is genuinely on par with belief in God, but that any mechanism that confers warrant purely by virtue of internal function and theological coherence, without criteria of intersubjective assessability, opens the door to epistemic relativism. Plantinga is not

unaware of this risk, but his response is essentially to restate the privileged status of the theistic design plan, thus begging the question against non-theists and adherents of other traditions.

In short, the internal logic of the *sensus divinitatis* model:

- Treats disagreement as evidence of a malfunction in the other
- Evaluates defeaters from within a pre-established noetic framework
- Offers no means of distinguishing veridical from delusional religious faculties, other than theological commitment
- Fails to meet standards of epistemic humility, integrity, or public justification

Thus, we arrive at a structural critique: RE, as constructed by Plantinga, is not merely non-evidential – it is non-responsive. It builds into its architecture a kind of epistemic preemption, wherein external critique is either downgraded or pathologized. This is what makes the model untenable when considered from the vantage point of epistemology in a pluralistic world. If epistemic justification is to mean more than personal conviction or theological fidelity, then it must include the capacity to account for and respond to the very real and persistent fact of reasonable disagreement.

## Reconstructing the Great Pumpkin Objection through the lens of religious disagreement

Michael Martin's (1990) Great Pumpkin Objection (GPO) has often been treated by defenders of Reformed Epistemology (RE) as little more than a rhetorical caricature – a parody meant to ridicule the idea that belief in God could be rational or warranted in the absence of evidence. Indeed, Plantinga himself responded to Martin with a combination of dismissal and clarification: Belief in God, he argued, can be properly basic and warranted because it stems from a cognitive faculty that is truth-aimed and designed by God, whereas belief in the Great Pumpkin is not (Plantinga, 2000, pp. 350–352). Since the Great Pumpkin is not real, there is no design plan that includes a cognitive faculty for perceiving it, and thus the analogy collapses.

Yet the problem with this line of response is that it presupposes precisely what is in question: the truth of the theistic framework. What

Martin's objection brings to light – when properly construed – is not a joke, but a deeply epistemological concern about arbitrariness and indistinguishability. The core question is this: What principled, non-question-begging criteria does Plantinga offer for distinguishing between a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis* and other alleged faculties that generate incompatible religious beliefs?

Plantinga appeals to the design plan and the teleological structure of cognitive faculties, but this move only works if one already assumes that God exists and has implanted the *sensus divinitatis*. Yet this is precisely the point of contention in a pluralistic epistemic environment. Thus, the GPO, properly reconstructed, is not primarily about fictional entities like the Great Pumpkin; it is about epistemic parity: the phenomenon whereby multiple, mutually incompatible belief systems claim basic status, truth-tracking faculties, and internal phenomenological support.

Indeed, contemporary philosophers of religion like Keith DeRose (1999, 2000) and John Pittard (2019) have noted that deep peer disagreement in religious contexts creates pressure on any epistemic model that fails to acknowledge the rational standing of the "other." When equally sincere, reflective, and intellectually virtuous individuals arrive at drastically different religious conclusions – based on experiences, intuitions, and testimonies they take to be veridical – we are forced to ask whether the epistemic playing field is symmetrical. If so, then we need criteria to explain why one belief-forming mechanism is reliable and the other is not. If no such criteria are available, then continuing to treat one's own belief as epistemically superior may amount to epistemic arrogance (Pittard, 2019, ch. 3).

Martin's objection is thus best understood as a demand for epistemic accountability. The proliferation of religious traditions – each with its own form of sensus: sensus Krishnae, sensus Allahis, sensus Xenuae – undermines the exclusivity of the Christian *sensus divinitatis* unless additional, publicly assessable criteria are brought to bear. The absence of such criteria exposes RE to the charge of epistemic relativism, or worse, dogmatism under the guise of externalism.

One way to see this more clearly is to transpose Martin's objection into the language of the epistemology of disagreement. Suppose we have two epistemic agents:

Agent A, a Reformed Christian, whose belief in God arises from the *sensus divinitatis*

- Agent B, a devout Hindu, whose belief in Vishnu arises from a faculty she experiences as just as immediate, spontaneous, and compelling

Now, both agents claim that their beliefs are basic and warranted, and that disagreement does not defeat their confidence because their faculties are functioning properly according to their respective religious frameworks. What rational basis does Agent A have to deny the warrant of Agent B's belief without appealing to her own theological commitments?

Plantinga's framework does not supply any non-circular method for adjudicating between the two claims. His response would likely be that only the Christian worldview is true, and thus only its design plan is genuinely truth-aimed. But this claim, once again, presupposes what the debate is meant to illuminate. As Richard Feldman (2006) argues, in cases of peer disagreement, one must consider the possibility that one's belief is mistaken – even if one continues to hold it. To deny this possibility without independent, non-circular support is to engage in epistemic special pleading.

The relevance of the Great Pumpkin Objection becomes especially acute when considered in light of the growing literature on higher-order evidence – evidence about the quality, reliability, or social endorsement of one's own epistemic processes. As Jennifer Lackey (2008) and Thomas Kelly (2005) have emphasized, the mere awareness of widespread disagreement among thoughtful interlocutors constitutes higher-order evidence that should affect one's doxastic attitudes. In religious contexts, this means that the very fact of persistent, reasonable disagreement – across cultures, traditions, and intellectual backgrounds – functions as a defeater, or at least a destabilizing epistemic signal.

But Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology (RE) lacks the resources to accommodate higher-order evidence in any robust way. Since the *sensus divinitatis* is taken to be a truth-aimed faculty installed by God, and since warrant is internally generated through proper function, the existence of disagreement is either dismissed (as arising from cognitive malfunction or the noetic effects of sin) or absorbed within the internal architecture of theistic commitment. In neither case does it generate a rational obligation to reassess one's beliefs.

This posture stands in stark contrast to the norms of epistemic integrity articulated by John Pittard in his *Disagreement, Deference, and Religious Commitment* (2019). Pittard contends that while religious commitment can remain rational in the face of disagreement, such rationality must be undergirded by a willingness to take disagreement seriously – both as a challenge to personal epistemic confidence and as a site of moral and intellectual humility. RE, by contrast, institutionalizes

a kind of epistemic insularity that effectively blocks the ethical and epistemological work of disagreement.

Indeed, what the GPO reveals is not just a problem of permissiveness (i.e., that RE allows belief in too many absurd entities), but a deeper failure to account for epistemic responsibility in conditions of pluralism. As Jonathan Matheson (2015) has argued, even if an agent is psychologically convinced that their belief is produced by a reliable faculty, the fact of epistemic symmetry among disagreeing peers generates a kind of pressure to reevaluate, or at least to downgrade confidence. The refusal to do so marks a departure from the norms of rational belief, even if it does not render the belief irrational per se.

We can frame this failure in terms of the distinction between first-order and second-order justification. First-order justification concerns the direct warrant for a belief – e.g., the immediate deliverance of the *sensus divinitatis*. Second-order justification concerns whether the subject is justified in trusting their first-order processes, given what they know about alternative processes and disagreement. The GPO, on this interpretation, is a second-order objection: It claims that RE fails to provide adequate grounds for believing that the *sensus divinitatis* is more reliable than competing faculties, or that it should be trusted in the face of epistemic parity.

Plantinga might attempt to rebut this by claiming that God's design plan ensures the reliability of the *sensus divinitatis*, and thus the second-order justification is built into the model. But again, this is question-begging: It assumes the truth of theism to defend the reliability of the theistic faculty. What is needed is a non-circular explanation – or at the very least, a willingness to acknowledge that the absence of such an explanation entails a limitation on the scope of RE's epistemic authority.

To illustrate, consider an atheist philosopher who, upon reflecting on the diversity of religious experience and the epistemic parity of believers in other traditions, concludes that no single religious cognitive faculty can claim privileged epistemic status. Such a person is not guilty of irrationality or bad faith; they are, rather, responding appropriately to epistemic ambiguity. The GPO, reconstructed in this light, demands that RE provide an account of how it avoids this ambiguity – and how it can justify continuing belief in the absence of comparative epistemic superiority.

This brings us to the key philosophical payoff of the GPO: It forces externalist epistemologies like RE to grapple with the demands of epistemic accountability. In a world where religious belief is contested and where sincere, intelligent people disagree profoundly, a model of

warrant that is immune to such disagreement cannot serve as a general theory of epistemic justification. At best, it can offer internal reassurance to the believer. At worst, it becomes a form of epistemic fideism, cloaked in the language of externalist normativity.

## Epistemic responsibility, virtue, and the limits of Reformed Epistemology

The force of the reconstructed Great Pumpkin Objection, when situated within the framework of contemporary epistemology of disagreement, raises not merely a challenge to the internal logic of Reformed Epistemology (RE), but a deeper set of questions about what it means to be epistemically responsible in conditions of deep pluralism. If RE fails to provide non-question-begging, intersubjectively available criteria for distinguishing between veridical and non-veridical religious faculties, it runs the risk of severing epistemic justification from the norms of public reason, defeasibility, and intellectual virtue.

### Epistemic integrity and the moral stakes of belief

As John Pittard argues in *Disagreement, Deference, and Religious Commitment* (2019), epistemic integrity entails a willingness to revise, withhold, or qualify one's belief in light of credible disagreement. This is not merely a procedural norm, but an epistemic and moral ideal: one that signals respect for the rational capacities of others, and recognition of one's own fallibility. While Pittard does not argue that all disagreements undermine rational commitment, he does insist that integrity requires openness to correction and awareness of epistemic tension (Pittard, 2019, pp. 72–78).

Plantinga's RE, in contrast, encourages a kind of epistemic closure. The believer, according to RE, is justified in maintaining belief in God even in the face of widespread disagreement, because such belief arises from a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*. Disagreement, therefore, is treated not as an epistemic challenge but as a diagnostic indication of dysfunction or cognitive suppression in the dissenter. In this framework, the non-believer's dissent is not a reason to reconsider one's belief, but a reason to reaffirm the theological diagnosis of the noetic effects of sin.

This approach creates a moral and epistemic tension. On the one hand,

RE claims to offer a robust account of rational theistic belief that is resilient in the face of evidential challenges. On the other hand, it does so by undermining the epistemic standing of others – often without engaging them on neutral epistemic grounds. This move, while defensible within a confessional framework, arguably violates the broader norms of epistemic virtue and the ethics of belief. From the perspective of social epistemology, RE may also be critiqued for fostering *testimonial injustice*, a form of epistemic vice where the testimony of certain speakers is discounted due to identity-based or worldview-based prejudice. As Miranda Fricker argues, testimonial injustice occurs when the hearer's prejudices deflate the speaker's credibility in a structurally patterned way (Fricker, 2007, pp. 1–7). If the RE model regards non-Christian interlocutors as lacking a functioning *sensus divinitatis*, it risks encoding this very form of injustice, epistemically marginalizing vast segments of humanity not through argument but via a theological presupposition. As Linda Zagzebski has argued, epistemic virtue requires that agents not only seek truth but do so in ways that respect the intellectual agency of others and are responsive to competing perspectives (Zagzebski, 1996, pp. 165–180).

To be clear, epistemic integrity does not demand a naïve relativism or the abandonment of deeply held beliefs in the face of any disagreement. Rather, it demands that one be able to offer reasons for one's continued belief that do not presuppose the very framework under dispute. Plantinga's model fails this test. The justification it offers for the reliability of the *sensus divinitatis* is acceptable only to those who already accept the theistic design plan. To others, it appears circular, insulated, and immune to critique.

## Public justification and the demands of rational discourse

A central challenge facing any account of warranted belief – especially religious belief – in a pluralistic society is the demand for public justification. While belief may be privately warranted within a particular noetic structure, its rational defensibility in broader discourse depends on its capacity to meet shared standards of evaluation. As Robert Audi argues, justification in public life demands reasons that are accessible, defeasible, and intersubjectively intelligible (Audi, 2000, pp. 86–88). A belief that cannot be defended without presupposing controversial metaphysical commitments fails to meet these criteria.

Plantinga's RE fails this test. Because the *sensus divinitatis* is only intelligible within a theological framework that already assumes God's existence and design plan, it lacks any force as a publicly assessable

ground for belief. This is not just a problem for interreligious dialogue; it is a failure of epistemic universality. A theory of warrant that cannot explain why one set of religious experiences or intuitions is more reliable than another – without invoking theological assumptions – is effectively parochial.

Furthermore, public justification is essential not just for interfaith rationality, but also for intragroup epistemic accountability. Even within religious communities, disagreements abound about the nature of divine revelation, the scope of reason, the authority of scripture, and the role of mystical experience. If each subcommunity simply appeals to its own internal design plan or faculty of revelation, then epistemic tribalism replaces rational engagement. This is the very condition that the GPO, as reconstructed in light of disagreement epistemology, seeks to expose: An epistemology that resists external challenge becomes a form of sectarianism.

Contemporary defenders of a more dialogical model – such as William Alston and Richard Swinburne–have recognized this tension and attempted to articulate conditions under which religious experience might function as evidence in a publicly evaluable sense. Alston (1991), for instance, proposes an analogy between mystical perception and sense perception, while Swinburne (2004) defends the Principle of Credulity: Unless we have strong reason to think otherwise, we should take apparent experiences at face value. These models at least gesture toward epistemic common ground.

By contrast, RE rejects even this modest ambition. Its internalist-externalist hybrid structure places warrant entirely within the believer's own cognitive system, secured by theological design, immune to challenge from outsiders. But as Elizabeth Fricker (2006) argues in her critique of testimonial warrant, any epistemology that renders belief incorrigible and self-validating abandons the very possibility of epistemic dialogue. It closes the door to both critical reflection and intellectual humility.

This self-referentiality also renders RE vulnerable to radical parity objections. If a person raised in an animist tradition claims to have a properly functioning faculty for perceiving forest spirits, and appeals to internal coherence and community testimony to justify this belief, RE has no resources to reject this claim unless it again assumes the falsity of the animist worldview. But this assumption is not epistemically neutral; it is theological stipulation masquerading as epistemic assessment.

Thus, the reconstructed GPO exposes the broader vulnerability in RE: By refusing to engage with public norms of justification and cross-perspectival critique, it sacrifices epistemic credibility for internal

coherence. This may be acceptable within the domain of confessional theology, but it fails as a contribution to general epistemology.

## Epistemic virtue and the ethics of belief

One of the most promising developments in contemporary epistemology is the shift from purely procedural models of justification to virtue-theoretic approaches, which emphasize the character and conduct of the epistemic agent. According to thinkers like Ernest Sosa, Linda Zagzebski, and Heather Battaly, epistemic justification is not merely about belief being produced by reliable processes; it also involves the cultivation of intellectual virtues such as open-mindedness, intellectual courage, and, most importantly in this context, epistemic humility.

Zagzebski (1996), in particular, argues that epistemic humility is central to moral and intellectual responsibility. It entails recognizing the limitations of one's own perspective, being willing to hear alternative viewpoints, and resisting the impulse to treat disagreement as a threat to epistemic identity. A belief system that encourages insulation, dismissal of dissent, and reduction of disagreement to pathology–whether by appeal to sin, suppression of truth, or cognitive malfunction–fails to meet the ethical standards of epistemic virtue.

Plantinga's model, despite being framed in terms of proper function and design, does little to promote such humility. Its logic leads the believer to regard disagreement not as a reason to reexamine or engage, but as a sign that others are epistemically disabled. The psychological security this affords may be comforting, but it comes at the cost of virtue-based responsibility. It encourages what Sosa (2007) would call *epistemic overconfidence*: confidence unearned by serious exposure to epistemic challenge.

This overconfidence is especially troubling in a religious context. Beliefs about ultimate reality carry not only epistemic stakes but moral and existential ones. A responsible religious epistemology must therefore be able to account for pluralism, to dialogue with alternative traditions, and to offer reasons that transcend theological insularity. When it fails to do so, it ceases to be a philosophy of religion and becomes instead a theology of assurance.

## Summary of the critique

In light of the above, we can now summarize the core epistemic deficiencies exposed by the reconstructed Great Pumpkin Objection:

**Epistemic insularity**: RE renders disagreement epistemically irrelevant by preemptively classifying dissenters as malfunctioning.

**Lack of public justification**: The *sensus divinitatis* is not assessable outside of a theistic framework, making it a parochial rather than a philosophical construct.

**Circularity of warrant**: Belief in the faculty is warranted by the theological truth of the faculty, thus undermining any independent justification.

**Virtue failure**: The model encourages epistemic confidence without corresponding openness to error or correction.

Each of these critiques gains further force when considered through the lens of disagreement epistemology. As thinkers like Christensen (2007), Feldman (2006), and Pittard (2019) argue, responsible belief under conditions of epistemic pluralism requires more than subjective certainty or internal coherence–it requires openness to rational tension, responsiveness to higher-order evidence, and the willingness to engage in rational revision.

Reformed Epistemology, in its strongest Plantingian form, lacks these qualities. It may offer internal reassurance to believers, but it fails the tests of public justification, epistemic humility, and inter-traditional dialogue. As such, its aspirations to function as a general epistemological model of religious belief are seriously undermined.

## Conclusion: Toward an epistemology of religious humility

The argument developed in this article has shown that Alvin Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology (RE), while sophisticated and influential, fails to meet the epistemic demands of pluralism, dialogical engagement, and second-order justification. The reconstructed Great Pumpkin Objection, far from being a mere parody, exposes the structural weaknesses of RE when it comes to interfaith disagreement, higher-order evidence, and the ethics of belief. These weaknesses cannot be addressed by merely refining the model's internal coherence; they require a fundamental rethinking of the epistemic norms governing religious belief.

### From confidence to responsibility: The cost of epistemic closure

One of the major insights of contemporary epistemology of disagreement

is that rationality is not reducible to internal coherence or first-order warrant. In a social world characterized by deep and persistent disagreement–especially in the domain of religion–epistemic agents are increasingly called upon to exhibit second-order responsibility: that is, a willingness to reflect on the reliability of their belief-forming processes in light of the beliefs of others. This responsibility does not entail immediate skepticism, but it does require a shift from confidence to epistemic conscientiousness (Christensen, 2007; Matheson, 2015).

RE resists this shift. By locating warrant in a divinely designed *sensus divinitatis*, it effectively severs epistemic responsibility from the dynamics of dialogue, vulnerability, and peer confrontation. The result is not just insulation, but a form of what we might call epistemic quietism: A disposition to treat one's own belief as immune to external critique and non-negotiable in the face of reasonable disagreement. While this may protect the believer from epistemic instability, it comes at the cost of rational engagement with others.

To be sure, every epistemology must draw some boundary between belief and revision, between steadfastness and conciliation. But RE draws this boundary too early and too rigidly. In doing so, it undermines the possibility of mutual understanding and the shared pursuit of truth, which are arguably central to the philosophical enterprise itself.

## Religious humility as an epistemic ideal

In light of these deficiencies, what might an alternative model look like? What kind of epistemic posture can acknowledge the depth of religious conviction without collapsing into dogmatism or relativism? I propose that religious humility, construed both as an intellectual virtue and an epistemological framework, offers a compelling alternative.

Religious humility begins with the recognition that, while religious beliefs often form the core of one's identity and worldview, they are also situated within a broader landscape of disagreement, cognitive diversity, and interpretive variability. This recognition need not entail relativism; it entails epistemic maturity–a willingness to acknowledge that one's cognitive faculties are fallible, that others may see more clearly, and that belief carries a responsibility to be responsive to reasons.

As Laura Buchak (2017) has argued, rational faith can include steadfast commitment in the face of disagreement, but only if it is accompanied by practices of self-examination, openness to evidence, and awareness of epistemic risk. Religious humility does not mean

believing less; it means believing better–with greater sensitivity to context, community, and conscience.

This humility is not merely a personal virtue; it is a structural requirement for any epistemology that seeks to explain how rational agents can hold divergent but deeply meaningful beliefs. Unlike RE, which offers assurance by insulating the believer from critique, a humility-based epistemology cultivates resilience through openness: the ability to maintain commitment without closing the door to challenge, dialogue, or change.

## The philosophical stakes: from parody to critical normativity

One of the major contributions of the reconstructed Great Pumpkin Objection is that it reframes a historically dismissive objection into a serious philosophical critique with normative implications. The original formulation, often interpreted as parody, functions in this revised version as a methodological device for testing whether an epistemological model is publicly accountable, normatively robust, and ethically responsible. The fact that RE fails this test is not just a local problem for Christian epistemology; it signals broader concerns about the limits of externalist justification in religious contexts.

This reconstructed objection also underscores the importance of epistemic parity as a regulative ideal. If two belief systems produce confident, internally coherent convictions through analogous mechanisms (e.g., spiritual perception, religious experience, testimonial transmission), then any epistemological model that claims to privilege one over the other must either offer independent criteria for adjudication or accept that such privilege is parochial. RE, by refusing both options, retreats from the normative ambition of epistemology into a confessional framework.

The ethical upshot is clear: Belief in ultimate matters–God, salvation, purpose–must be accompanied by epistemic virtues such as honesty, openness, and humility. These are not merely psychological attitudes; they are normative requirements for rational agency in a pluralistic world. Belief that refuses dialogue, dismisses disagreement, and reinforces itself through theological insulation is no longer epistemic–it is ideological.

## Concluding affirmation

This article has argued that Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology, despite

its elegance and originality, fails to meet the demands of contemporary epistemology, particularly in light of religious disagreement. By insulating belief from challenge, dismissing alternative religious experiences, and denying the role of higher-order evidence, RE undermines the very project of epistemology: The pursuit of justified belief through rational engagement.

A reconstructed Great Pumpkin Objection, interpreted through the lens of disagreement epistemology and virtue theory, reveals that RE cannot account for the moral and epistemic responsibility that comes with belief. In its place, this article gestures toward an alternative: an epistemology of religious humility, grounded in responsiveness, dialogical openness, and virtuous belief.

Such an epistemology does not require abandoning religious conviction. It requires believing with awareness, with a sense of the risks of error, and with an enduring commitment to truth–not only as something possessed but as something sought in the company of others.

## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no competing interests.

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