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Preface

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Preface

Proponents of Reformed epistemology claim, in contrast to those standing in the long line of natural theology, that belief in God need not be rooted in argument but can be based, more or less directly, on experience. One of the results of their suggestion is that certain beliefs about God are just as rational as beliefs about perceived physical objects. I argue against this claim here.

Although I am critical of Reformed epistemology in this respect, there is much of value in its ideas. One central notion is that theistic beliefs are rational in ways similar to our nontheistic beliefs. I view this idea as important to our understanding of theistic belief and its rationality. But to which nontheistic beliefs are theistic beliefs similar? My thesis is that beliefs about God are just as rational as beliefs about human persons, rather than beliefs about non-human physical objects. The theory in which this epistemological parity can be made out, however, is not foundationalism, as two of the main Reformed epistemologists argue. Holism is a happier home for theistic belief. At least so this book suggests.

In certain ways, some of the writings of John Hick and George Mavrodes are the most recent ancestors of Reformed epistemology, for they take experience of the divine seriously as part of the epistemic map that epistemologists of religion need to sketch. The more recent set of arguments and discussions centers in the work of William P. Alston, Alvin Plantinga, and Nicholas Wolterstorff.

It is from Plantinga and Wolterstorff that the “Reformed” in “Reformed epistemology” comes, since both philosophers are intellectually rooted in the Reformed theological tradition (they stand in the theological line traceable to John Calvin). And so the name remains. Regardless of what one calls Reformed epistemology, or who its intellectual ancestors are, its central claims are important and intriguing.

As always with works of this kind, the author owes much to many people for a variety of activities. I can hardly separate my thinking from that of my teachers, J. William Forgie, Francis W. Dauer, and Burleigh T. Wilkins. They, along with Philip Clayton, Richard F. Galvin, V. James Mannoia, Shirley A. Mullen, Alvin Plantinga, and David E. Schrader, read all or parts of the manuscript at several stages too disparate to summarize easily. Each provided helpful comments and suggestions. William P. Alston, as the series editor, read the manuscript several times and offered valuable philosophical advice along the way. Although he disagrees with me on various important points, one could not ask for a more helpful and fair editor. Director John Ackermann, of Cornell University Press, enthusiastically supported the project since our first contact. Kay Scheuer, Joanne Hindman, and John Thomas improved the prose in many ways. As well as those who read the manuscript, there are those who encouraged its writing. Among them are Mark Bernstein, Steven D. Fratt, Arthur R. Miller, Stanley Obitts, Jeanne Reeseman, James F. Sennett, Saranindranath Tagore, and Robert Wennberg. They have, in a variety of ways, cheered the writing on.

I spent five years teaching at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California. My friends and colleagues from that time deserve thanks, and the following people in particular deserve special mention for their contributions. The “Tea Group” was, during much of the time I was writing, a weekly source of intellectual stimulation and moral support that took me beyond my own narrow concerns to those of the broader intellectual community. The group was made up of historians, political scientists, biblical scholars, literary experts, and theologians. Its members were Steven Cook, A. R. “Pete” Diamond, Robert H. Gundry, Michael McClymond, Bruce McKeon, Shirley A. Mullen, William Nelson, John Rapson,

Thomas Schmidt, and Jonathan Wilson. Ned Divelbiss and John Murray provided carrel space for me to work in the Roger Voskuyl Library, along with unflagging good cheer. George Blankenbaker, vice president for academic affairs, arranged faculty development grants to provide me with summer research time. Lois Gundry, the secretary for the philosophy and religious studies departments, and her staff retyped portions of the manuscript into the computer from my handwritten changes. Since I moved to the University of Texas at San Antonio, Thomas Wood, of the Division of English, Classics, and Philosophy, likewise worked at the computer for me. Adrian A. Amaya helped me read the page proofs.

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My niece, Martha Anderson, spent the summer of 1991 in Santa Barbara with my family and took care of my son while I worked in the library. Now three years old, Ian Alexander Malone McLeod came along in the middle of my writing. He has grown into an unsurpassed delight, nothing less than the dance of God in our living room. Finally, my wife, Rebecca L. M. McLeod, not only read the manuscript and was a member of the “Tea Group” but listened to me talk—endlessly—about the ideas in this book. She has walked with me the path of truth, joy, and love—but especially love—for over sixteen years. How can I thank her? Words fail.

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