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REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE PROBLEM OF
RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

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Review of Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2012)

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“The world displays a very large variety of religious and anti-religious ways of thinking, with most of them pursued by people of great intellect and seriousness. Consider the many varieties of beliefs that go under the names of Hinduism or Buddhism, and the difficulty of categorizing such sects. Or even among theistic religions, there are many different types of beliefs that go by the names Christianity, Islam, or Judaism. There are also large varieties of beliefs that are essentially non-spiritual in nature such as Confucianism, that still fall under the category of religious belief[...]. Add to this pantheon of religious diversity the areligious: those who reject religious belief. Amidst this backdrop in contemporary philosophy of religion there has been much debate about whether one can defend any form of religious exclusivism, the view that the religious propositions (or some of the religious propositions) of one religion are true. The debate typically asks whether mutually exclusive religious beliefs provide a defeater for the religious propositions of any one particular religion”.

Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology and the Problem of Religious Diversity*, 1-2.

Joseph Kim’s book titled *Reformed Epistemology and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2012), subtitled *Proper Function, Epistemic Disagreement, and Christian Exclusivism*, focuses on the issue of religious diversity intertwining, as the author explains in the Preface of his book, epistemology, the philosophy of religion and religious pluralism.¹

The book is valuable both for experts in these fields, for professors and students, but also for any reader who might be less familiar with the instruments of epistemology but interested in brilliant argumentation regarding one of the current and controversial problems of today’s world: diversity and pluralism of (religious) beliefs, which ignites the question of tolerance and unity. As the back cover text underlines, the book “uses a mixture of informal and formal logic” being a “useful tool for the academic theologian and accessible for the general reader”. Readers are warned in the Preface that non-experts in philosophy should start with chapters 1, 3 and 6 and then go to the more technical ones, chapters 2, 4 and 5. The list of Abbreviations generously clarifies the set of logical constructs used in the demonstration, launching, in advance, some of the formulations that the approach problematizes. Moreover, the book has a very well designed structure, in the form of a “strategy” of defense, clearly explained in the ‘Prospectus’ of the Introduction to the book.

The starting hypothesis is simple: diversity presupposes disagreement, but also respect or “equal weight”, regarding different opinions of “epistemic peers” along with one’s own opinion; thus, in terms of religious beliefs, there are mutually exclusive religious propositions

that serve as “defeaters for one another”. What ‘would a defeater mean?’ one would ask, and the author epistemologically explains the concept in a footnote: “a defeater as I use it here is simply a *belief P* that is incompatible with another *belief Q*, such that given *P*, one *cannot rationally* hold to *Q*. Thus belief in *Q* is defeated by belief *P*”.² This is, in Kim’s demonstration, a “sound argument for the problem of religious diversity” and, most importantly, “a serious problem for the Christian exclusivist”.³ It is a problem because: in the author’s view, religious diversity is not successful when having to provide a *defeater* for Christian exclusivism, which is the main thesis that the present book concentrates on. The Preface is enlightening in this sense. The author intends to argue *against* religious diversity by *defending* Christian belief by means of a Reformed Epistemological perspective – the stance that “belief in God is properly basic”; moreover, developing his defense theory of Christian belief, J. Kim uses Alvin Plantinga’s *warrant*⁴ (in *Warranted Christian Belief*) as “proper functionality” which is “that quality and quantity that distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief”. What is argued by means of Plantinga’s theory is that warranted Christian beliefs are produced by “a properly functioning cognitive faculty”.⁵

“Identifying the Problem” is the part in which Joseph Kim delineates some of the concepts and theories of his thesis. *Christian Exclusivism* (CE) is CE_1 [=“The world was created by God, an almighty, all-knowing and perfectly good personal being (the sort of being who holds beliefs, has aims and intentions, and can act to accomplish these aims)”] + CE_2 (“Human beings require salvation, and God has provided a unique way of salvation through incarnation, life, sacrificial death, and resurrection of his divine son”).⁶ These are two Christian propositions that Christians believe as true, as Plantinga formulates them in *Warranted Christian Belief* (p. 432). After giving these two propositions, Kim introduces the reader into one of Thomas Aquinas’ *sound* arguments that lead to the conclusion that *God exists*. It is here that one is explained what the difference of argumentation is in the case of Reformed Epistemologists, namely that, as opposed to Aquinas, they “reject the notion that one can offer a sound argument for the conclusion that God exists”.⁷ This because the belief in God is *basic* and, therefore, true. What Plantinga brings as new is the conclusion that the defense of Christian Exclusivism is not possible for those who “do not already hold to CE as true will” (here CE is synonym with Christian belief, explains Kim in the footnote). Additionally, Kim explains Plantinga’s *exclusivist* views when referring to what a *Christian exclusivist* would be in relation to the *conditions* to the acceptance of Christian belief (or CE) as follows:

- (i) they are fully aware of other religions,
- (ii) they are aware that there is genuine devotion and piety in the other religions,

(iii) and they know of no argument that would convince all or most of these other intelligent adherents of other religions and the anti-religious to their own exclusivist position.⁸

In other words, the key element in this proposition is *condition*; the Christian believes that his belief is true, and has no argument for it, and he also knows he cannot produce an argument for which other religious beliefs are false (in Kim's terms: "he cannot produce an argument that shows that all mutually exclusive propositions to CE are false"). What opposes or argues against Christian exclusivism/ belief, or against any other type of religious exclusivism, one is explained further on, is *religious diversity*. Joseph Kim's understanding of PRD (or the problem of religious diversity) could be shortly rephrased as follows: (1) there are many religious believers and non-believers, thus, many "mutually exclusive religious propositions"; (2) they are epistemic peers (similar people in terms of intelligence, honesty, data etc.); (3) all these propositions should be given "equal weight"; (4) given 3, these propositions are *defeaters* for one another; (5) consequently, there's no tenability for any of these propositions; (6) in conclusion, any religious exclusivism is groundless, it is *unwarranted*.¹⁰ Kim's counterargument is directed against points 3 and 4 and he underlines that his demonstration is by means of epistemic and not metaphysical terms. This means that *he is not to*: (1) defend the Christian scripture or belief but "to defend CE from PRD"; (2) use any "non-realist conception of truth" (despite the complexity of religious truth) assuming that both religious and non-religious propositions have a truth-value; (3) consider any emotivist views; (4) consider any non-cognitivist views.¹¹ After precisely "identifying the problem" and accurately stating what he will *not* do, Joseph Kim concisely outlines: "my focus will solely be on whether mutually exclusive religious beliefs serve as a defeater for CE given Plantinga's proper function account of warrant"¹². At this point, Kim turns to the "primary focus of his thesis", as he calls it, which is Plantinga's *defense* of religious exclusivism *from* two primary objections: the moral and the epistemic one. The Moral Objection means, in Plantinga's words, accepting CE with "self-serving arbitrariness, an arrogance or egoism". The Epistemic Objection that Plantinga describes states that Christian exclusivism is unjustified based on the following three propositions: (1) the Christian exclusivist who believes in '(i) X is true, (ii) X is false and (iii) because I am not sure if X is true or false, I will abstain from believing in them' violates epistemic duties; (2) he is intellectually arbitrary; (3) thus, he is unjustified in his condition.¹³ The point Kim gets to, after detailing Plantinga's epistemological argumentation *against* these two objections is that the simple knowledge/ awareness of religious diversity *need not* have anything to say regarding one's religious belief/ exclusivism.

The entire hypothesis synthesized so far is meticulously developed in five chapters. Thus, Chapter 2 entitled "Warrant, Proper Function, and

Christian Belief” debates on Plantinga’s argumentation of the belief that it is possible to hold to Christian belief while displaying proper cognitive function that is externalist in nature. The demonstrative path uses three steps, which J. Kim distinctly names from the very beginning: first, he introduces the reader into Plantinga’s “warrant-as-proper function account”; second, he refers to Bonjour’s anti-foundationalist argument against “externalist species of epistemic justification”; third, he is to “apply the warrant-as-proper-function account to both perceptual belief and Christian belief”.¹⁴ It is here that the author emphasizes the two elements that give foundation to Plantinga’s *warrant*: proper function and the design plan, formulated as follows:

- 1) One’s cognitive faculties must function properly,
- 2) one’s cognitive environment has to be sufficiently similar to the one for which the cognitive faculties were designed,
- 3) the design plan that governs the production of such beliefs is aimed at producing true belief, and
- 4) the design plan is a good one such that there is a high statistical (or objective) probability that a belief produced under these conditions will be true.¹⁵

Eventually, Joseph Kim gets to the key element of his argumentation of Plantinga’s theory, namely: the beliefs, produced by properly functioning cognitive faculties and generated by the A/C model¹⁶ (Aquinas/ Calvin model), are warranted because their production satisfies the condition for warrant. This because “God has enabled in each person a cognitive faculty known as the *sensus divinitatis* (SD) or the sense of divinity” and such a person produces warranted religious beliefs in a particular environment in accordance with a design plan that aims at the production of beliefs, explains J. Kim.¹⁷

Chapter 3, “Epistemic Disagreement and the Equal Weight Theory” is to challenge and argue against the Equal Weight View (EW), which, in Kim’s view, is wrong. This proposition is the fundament for the “claim that CE is not defensible due to its multiple competitors”/ religious diversity. EW is defined as follows:

In cases of peer disagreement, one should give equal weight to the opinion of an epistemic peer and to one’s own opinion. An epistemic peer is someone who is alike epistemically in every way given the particular belief in matters of intelligence, honesty, thoroughness, exposure to question/ research/ data, etc.¹⁸

The very direct, simple and sound explanation that the author starts from is the case of compatibilism versus incompatibilism with respect to free will. J. Kim invites the reader to hypothetically place himself in two positions, one of the trained professional philosopher who has built his career arguing for compatibilism and who is highly regarded as competent, and the other one, his epistemic peer, who has done the same but focused on the issue of incompatibilism. The question the reader is asked, and which immediately calls for the answer ‘no’, is the following:

Should the mere fact that an epistemic peer disagrees with you, when we share the same evidence, force you to change your beliefs by retreating into agnosticism or skepticism with respect to the belief? In other words, should one give equal weight to the opinion of an epistemic peer and to one’s own opinion?¹⁹

After discussing three cases of epistemic disagreement, J. Kim turns back to EW and Z (where Z is the proposition “The mere existence of epistemic peers who disagree is not sufficient as a reason for one to give up one’s belief or retreat into skepticism/ agnosticism”²⁰) and then he provides further epistemological arguments in favor of his opinion that EW is incoherent. The last part of this chapter centers on the problem of religious diversity and the EW theory, generated by the conclusion regarding EW’s incoherency. Put shortly, the statement is the following: religious diversity (PRD) is not sound because it depends on equal weight (EW), which is incoherent; this comes from the proposition that there may be two groups, those that claim that CE is warranted if true, and those who claim the opposite, i.e. that CE is unjustified; these two pairs are epistemic peers (EW), but a Christian exclusivist will always consider *he is not* an epistemic peer but rather an “epistemically privileged with respect to CE” and that probably the other part’s *sensus divinitatis* is damaged.²¹

The subject of Chapter 4 is announced at the end of Ch. 3: the reader is told that there is still a problem in the argumentation residing in the fact that, given the multiplicity of competing religious beliefs, it is impossible to show all the other competing religious as false. The chapter debates on *defeaters* and on the most significant objection to Plantinga’s defense of CE. It is here that the author develops his theory on the nature of defeaters, defined above. Thus, there are *rebutting defeaters* where what one learns is inconsistent with the original and defeated belief²². *Undercutting defeaters* do not learn something incompatible with the original belief but rather they learn something that undercuts their reasons for thinking so²³. A *warrant defeater* uses the warrant, i.e. the feature that yields true beliefs with knowledge and the example provided here is of the real and fake barns of Carl Ginet²⁴. Eventually, the type of defeater that mostly interests Joseph Kim is the *epistemic defeater*, who may

be a rational or a warrant one and who “may nullify the belief’s positive epistemic status, or at least will decrease the belief’s positive epistemic status such that one may have reduced confidence in the belief or perhaps may give up the belief”²⁵. The next parts of the chapter concentrate on arguing why a Christian exclusivist is *not* required to give up CE when faced with the facts of mutually exclusivist religious beliefs, bringing forward the objection of Martin and DeRose to Plantinga’s theory. “The Internalist Criterion and the Inadequacy Thesis”, the fifth chapter of the book, goes on with the argumentation against the objections to Plantinga’s Reformed Epistemology, in the manner of Chapter 4, this time focusing on Julian Willard’s thesis regarding Plantinga’s inadequate argumentation when defending Christian belief. What Joseph Kim manages to counter-argument is the following thesis of Willard:

Plantinga has neglected the actual (both intellectual and doctrinal) commitments of religious believers as well as failed to account for the “intellectual obligation” that is at work in such cases of conflicting religious belief with respect to pluralism [...] without an internalist defense of CE, versus the Reformed Epistemologist’s externalist defence of CE, mutually exclusive religious beliefs with respect to CE do serve as defeaters for CE.²⁶

J. Kim follows the same method when declining Deane-Peter Baker’s thesis [that holds that the model A/C is inadequate for demonstrating that PC is true (a true Christian belief is likely to have warrant) because Plantinga has no argument for the claim that Christian belief is also warranted to the non-believer].²⁷

Chapter 6, “The Central Issue of Religious Exclusivism”, focuses on demonstrating that if there is a warrant-as-proper-function account, Plantinga’s Reformed Epistemological defense of CE is reasonable. For this, J. Kim chooses to debate *against* John Hick’s objections to Plantinga’s theory, namely his claim that Plantinga failed to address the “central issue between religious exclusivism and religious pluralism” and that there are other world religions and beliefs whose tenets are epistemologically well-based and “whose moral and spiritual fruits in human lives seem to be as valuable as those of Christian faith”²⁸. The second objection of Hick focuses on Plantinga’s statement that beliefs as well as religions are different depending on one’s place of birth and on one’s nurture. Hick sustains that one “is not usually a pluralist as result of having been raised from childhood to be one, as [...] one is raised from childhood to be a Christian or a Muslim or a Hindu” and because the cases are very different, “the analogy fails”²⁹. Hence, Kim explains, what Hick means is that one “should be wary” of the beliefs instilled by the surrounding religious culture and that one should “think critically through them”; furthermore, Kim adds,

“it is unclear” why the case of religious pluralism is different from the case of one who is born and raised as a Christian, for example, and that what Hick probably means is that a religious pluralist is “not raised as one” but becomes one “via some convincing arguments later on his life”, which is pretty much the same in the case of religious conversion. Kim concludes that Hick failed to give argument for “why they are different”.³⁰

What this book manages to demonstrate, using the tools of an epistemological approach, of the philosophy of religion and of pluralism, is outlined by Joseph Kim in the last part of the text, “Retrospection”³¹. It is here that he succinctly frames the entire thesis, recapitulating his three arguments that have led him to the conclusion that one can hold to a belief even if s/he cannot produce an argument to show that this *belief* is more likely than its rivals, and this is also valid in the case of epistemic peers with conflicting beliefs. Furthermore, he emphasizes that all the objections formulated against Plantinga’s Reformed Epistemological defense of Christian belief proved not to be able to provide a defeater to it, including the rival religious views to CE that are not defeaters to Christian belief. Even if there are mutually exclusive beliefs and even if a Christian exclusivist has no arguments against those who disagree with him, s/he can hold to his/ her belief as true and reasonable, due to his/her cognitive function.

The greatest merit of the book relies in the minute and judicious demonstration of the main hypotheses as well as in its careful structuring of argumentation in a coherent, logical and consistent epistemological discourse on one of the most controversial issues of today’s postmodern world – the principle of ‘unity in diversity’ or of tolerance and pluralism.

Notes:

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² Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2012), 2.

³ Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology...*, ix.

⁴ Here is Kim’s reformulation of Plantinga’s *warrant*: “A belief B has warrant for subject S if and only if the relevant processes that produce belief B are functioning properly in a cognitive environment sufficiently similar to that for which S’s faculties are designed; and the modules of the design plan governing the production B are (1) aimed at truth, and (2) such that there is a high objective probability that a belief formed in accordance with those modules [...] is true”, p. x.

⁵ Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology...*, ix-x.

⁶ Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology...*, 2.

- ⁷ Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology...*, 3.
- ⁸ Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology...*, 3.
- ⁹ Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology...*, 4.
- ¹⁰ Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology...*, 4-5.
- ¹¹ Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology...*, 5.
- ¹² Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology...*, 6.
- ¹³ Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology...*, 12.
- ¹⁴ Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology...*, 18-19.
- ¹⁵ Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology...*, 19.
- ¹⁶ Here is Kim's reformulation of the A/C model: "1) The *sensus divinitatis*, a cognitive faculty implanted by God, whose role is to bring about cognitive renewal such that one is able to see the deliverances of God from one's own sin through God's son Jesus Christ in the acknowledging of specifically Christian beliefs such as CE. 2) Beliefs produced by the SD are basic in nature and are not warranted via an appeal to argument but by their basicity", p. 44.
- ¹⁷ Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology...*, 43.
- ¹⁸ Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology...*, 46.
- ¹⁹ Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology...*, 47.
- ²⁰ Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology...*, xiii.
- ²¹ Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology...*, 64-65.
- ²² See the example of the sheep in the field (which eventually proves to be a dog) on page 66.
- ²³ See the example of the (apparently) red widgets on an assembly line (actually illuminated with red infrared light) on pages 66-67.
- ²⁴ See the example on page 67.
- ²⁵ Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology...*, 69.
- ²⁶ Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology...*, 82.
- ²⁷ Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology...*, 94-95.
- ²⁸ Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology...*, 100.
- ²⁹ Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology...*, 103.
- ³⁰ Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology...*, 105-106.
- ³¹ Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology...*, 106-108.