

Disagreement and Religion: Problems and Prospects*

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DISAGREEMENTS over religion are common, entrenched, and often bitter. Harmful sectarian and internecine conflict, when taken to extremes, often result in war and terrorism. Even when less violent, such pervasive disagreements can nevertheless afflict social groups and family relationships. Understanding the social and political contexts of such events is a task for historians and sociologists. Evaluating the religious divisions themselves is a task for theologians and scholars of religion.

Philosophers, on the other hand, focus largely on conceptual and normative issues emerging from what sorts of disagreements there are, and what differences they might make to what an individual should, or should not, believe. Such disagreements over religion offer a lens on how to think about distinctive epistemological issues, such as the nature and weight of evidence when it comes to religious topics; the rationality of belief or religious practices; the epistemological import of understanding; the value of epistemic humility given an awareness of religious diversity; whether testimony is an adequate basis for believing anything related to religion; and whether knowledge in some religious domain is possible given widespread disagreement.

Religious devotion, of course, consists in more than simply cognitive commitments of the sort labelled by doxastic concepts like *belief*, *faith*, or *credence* (subjective probability, as studied by formal epistemology). But epistemologists in philosophy have attended largely to the doxastic terrain because cognitive commitments are thought in some sense to ground the rationality of deciding to engage, or continue in, the practices associated with a religion (or in the case of nonbelief, refraining from such commitments grounds the rationality of abstaining from practicing any particular religion at all). So we

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shall focus largely on the broad family of doxastic notions often captured by the label of “belief,” where this most often refers to outright belief of the sort which, if true and other conditions hold, could count as knowledge; but we shall sometimes also consider credence, understanding, and where relevant, faith.¹

This chapter aims to provide a map of the contemporary landscape on disagreement, detailing both the conceptual and normative issues in play in the debates in mainstream analytic epistemology, and how these have (and have not) translated into the domain of religious diversity and disagreement.² In §1 we examine several sorts of disagreement, and consider in detail some epistemological issues on which many philosophers have recently focused: in particular, what range of attitudes a body of evidence can support, understanding higher-order evidence, and thinking about who counts as an epistemic “peer”. In §2 we will turn to how some of these questions surface when considering disagreements over religion, including debates over the nature of evidence and truth in religion, epistemic humility, concerns about irrelevant influences and about divine hiddenness, and arguments over exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.³ Finally, §3 offers a brief summary of the contributors’ essays in this volume.

1 Epistemology and Disagreement

Philosophers thinking about the epistemology of disagreement⁴ have tended to approach the matter by asking when, if ever, learning about a specific sort

¹A large literature has recently emerged examining the nature of faith, including whether it must involve a cognitive propositional commitment. See, e.g., Audi 2011, Buchak 2012 and 2014a, Howard-Snyder 2016, and Kvanvig 2018, and Rice, McKaughn, and Howard-Snyder 2017 (including the several essays in that issue). For a helpful overview, see Buchak 2014b. Related issues are raised by the philosophy literature on trust: see e.g. Faulkner and Simpson 2017 for a selection.

²Related issues arise with the domain of moral disagreement; though we cannot consider them here, see Mackie 1977 (chap. 1), Audi 2014, Vavova 2014, and Rowland 2017.

³Some parts of these sections borrow from, or expand on, material in Benton 2019.

⁴See especially the collections Feldman and Warfield 2010; Christensen and Lackey 2013; and Machuca 2013. For overviews, see Christensen 2009, Frances and Matheson 2018, and Ferrari and Pedersen 2019.

of disagreement with one's belief ought to lead one to revise that belief (for example, by dropping the belief and suspending judgment on the matter; or, if one began with merely a high credence as opposed to an outright belief, by lowering one's credence). For it seems that in a great range of cases, encountering such a disagreement puts pressure on you to at least become less confident that you, as opposed to your disagreeer, are getting things right. That is, it can seem that the only rational option for you is to concede that you may be getting it wrong, and modulate your conviction so as to be conciliatory toward one's interlocutor. For example, imagine that you and a friend go out to dinner. You both agree to split the check evenly, adding a 20% tip. You both look at the bill, and each mentally calculate your share. You confidently conclude that each owes \$43, whereas your friend concludes that each of you owe \$48. How should you respond?⁵

If you supposed yourself to be typically better at such mental calculations, you might insist that your friend recalculate while you maintain confidence in your result. (Or vice versa if you think your friend is likely to be better at such calculations.) But suppose that, prior to this dinner check disagreement, you regarded your friend as being about as good as you at mental math, and suppose that you regarded your memory and cognitive functioning (and how much you've had to drink) as being about equal. If you had regarded them in these ways as your *peer* with respect to mental calculation on this occasion, it would be in part because you had no reasons *independent* of the current disagreement over how much each owes to think that you rather than they would conclude correctly. But if so, it can seem highly irrational for you now to prioritize your answer as correct and insist that they must have made a mistake; for from your perspective, you were each as likely as the other to have made a mistake. So if you're rational, you will probably lower your confidence that you each owe \$43, since either (or both) of you may have made a mistake;⁶ and it's because you've reduced your confidence that you would then recalculate. This seems all the more appropriate when you

⁵See Christensen 2007, 193 and 2009, 757 for such cases.

⁶Similar cases can be given about perceptual judgments rather than mental reasoning (Feldman 2006, 223; 2007, 207–208), for example, that you and your friend each see the end of a horse race, from nearly identical viewing points, but you disagree about which horse won (Kelly 2010, 113).

imagine how you would feel if you came to learn instead that your dinner friend had *agreed* with your conclusion: you would no doubt become, if only slightly, more confident that you had gotten it right.

More generally, when we regard our interlocutors as being our peers—as well-informed as we, and of similar intelligence (and not joking with us)—then learning that they disagree, particularly when we are working with the same evidence, ought to lead us each to suspend judgment and reassess. Similar results apply when we move from full *belief*, *disbelief*, and *suspension* of belief, to finer-grained doxastic states like degrees of belief or subjective probabilities, sometimes called *credences*:⁷ if you have a 0.9 credence that it will rain in Seattle today, whereas I have only 0.3 credence that it will rain in Seattle today, and we both updated only on evidence from (what we regard as) equally reliable sources about the weather, you will likely lower your credence from 0.9 (and I will likely raise mine from 0.3).⁸ And this seems like the most rational thing for each of us to do.

Both of the above cases are framed from the first-person perspective, imagining yourself as one of the participants: from that perspective, it seems that you each should reduce your confidence (or drop your belief altogether) and reconsider. But return to the dinner check-splitting case, and take a neutral third-person perspective: someone else observing us might arrive at a different judgment about what we each should do. They might insist that if the correct answer was that we each owe \$48, then strictly speaking, only you, and not your friend, should reduce your confidence (and recalculate), since your friend in fact got it right. Perhaps then there is a sense in which the person, if any, who was accurate in their assessment has the right to remain steadfast in their belief. But recall that from the accurate party's perspective,

⁷Credences are thought of as a measure of “partial” belief. Credences in a proposition p are given by real numbers from 0 (complete certainty in p 's falsity) to 1 (complete certainty in p 's truth), where 0.5 amounts to being indifferent, p being as likely as not. Axioms of the probability calculus provide constraints on such credences; formal epistemologists argue over principles of probabilistic reasoning, particularly how to model appropriate updates to one's credences, given new evidence. For overviews, see Weisberg 2019, and Hájek and Staffel *forthcoming*.

⁸Hereafter, unless otherwise stated, I shall use “belief” as a catch-all to refer to both full and partial belief, such that “lowering” one's confidence can mean either dropping one's full belief in favor or suspending judgment, or reducing one's credence.

their disagreeer was as likely as they themselves were to have made a mistake; for a crucial feature of the case is that they have no *independent* reason, outside their handling of the evidence, to think that they are indeed accurate rather than inaccurate on this occasion. It would seem dubiously obstinate for them to insist that, even though they regard you as a mental math peer, you and not them should recalculate because, in fact, you each owe \$48; for the disagreement itself, given that you are peers, seems to call into question whether you each owe that amount. Perhaps then rationality requires that in cases of disagreement between those we regard as peers, we ought to be conciliatory by shifting our confidence away from our initial conclusion, and toward our peer's. The normative principles according to which we ought to do this vary among those who endorse such *Conciliationism*. For example, according to an early view, one must grant "equal weight" to one's peer's opinion as one would to one's own, and doing so requires that each reduce one's confidence, perhaps even suspend judgment or move to 0.5 credence, when one first learns of such disagreements.⁹ Such a view might recommend that in such cases, one must "split the difference" between a peer's credence and one's own.

1.1 Uniqueness and Permissivism

Many philosophers claim that implicit in such Conciliationist views is the idea that a given set of evidence supports, at most, only one doxastic response, such as belief, or a particular credence.¹⁰ Consider the principle *Uniqueness*:

Uniqueness Given one's total evidence there is, at most, one unique rational doxastic attitude that one can take to any proposition.¹¹

If Uniqueness (or something comparable) is true, then when two peers handle the same evidence and end up disagreeing on the conclusion, at least one

⁹See Elga 2007, Christensen 2007, King 2012, Cohen 2013, and Matheson 2014 and 2015 for discussion.

¹⁰However, Christensen 2016 argues that Conciliationism can be motivated even without Uniqueness.

¹¹White 2005, 445, and Feldman 2007, 205. For a detailed overview of ensuing debate, see Kopec and Titelbaum 2016.

of them has mistakenly arrived at an irrational doxastic attitude. The one who has formed the irrational attitude should revise their view; but on the assumption that each peer has no independent reason to think themselves the irrational one, each will, given Uniqueness, likely feel conciliatory pressure in the above cases. Thus some philosophers argue that Uniqueness helps explain such conciliatory pressure. But if Uniqueness is false, there is room for thinking that there could sometimes be reasonable disagreements, even among peers who have the same evidence. Denying Uniqueness amounts to endorsing a permissive view of what rationality requires, such that one's evidence may rationally support more than one doxastic position. But there are different ways of departing from Uniqueness. One might be what Roger White (2005) calls a *radical* permissivist, by thinking that, at least in some circumstances, one's total evidence can permit either believing that p or believing that $\neg p$. But arguably, if rationality could be that permissive (even if only in perhaps rare circumstances), then people with identical evidence could sometimes reasonably disagree, since that evidence can reasonably support believing either way. Yet in those cases at least, believing a particular way can seem arbitrary and not directed at the truth. Such a radical permissiveness would also, paradoxically, suggest that each of the disagreeers could rightly think that the other reasonably evaluated the evidence, even though each will presumably still regard their own assessment of the evidence as reasonable and correct.¹² Less controversially, one might be a *moderate* permissivist by denying this radical view yet insisting that, at least in some circumstances, one's total evidence can permit, say, either believing that p or suspending judgment on p . More moderate still would be a view that denies each of the above concerning outright belief and withholding belief, but allows that in some circumstances, one's evidence at least makes rational a (perhaps small) range of credences (e.g. Schoenfield 2014 and 2018).¹³ Each of these permissivist approaches offers a kind of pluralism about the sorts of doxastic

¹²See Schoenfield 2014, 200–202 for discussion of similar worries.

¹³Note that in the empirical sciences, it is standard practice to offer confidence intervals along with predictions, where the disciplinary methodologies have some guidelines for how to produce such intervals, given the data and the hypotheses under examination. One way to think about such confidence intervals is to allow that the data (evidence) in question permit a range of credences in the prediction.

response that a set of evidence supports.

Notice however that for any such permissivist view, it is desirable that the view be able to offer an account of under what circumstances, or with respect to which domains, we can expect the permissivism to hold, and why. When exactly might a set of evidence in and of itself permit more than one doxastic response, or a range of credences? What domains, if not idealized cases of peers doing mental math for splitting a dinner check, may allow for reasonable disagreement over one's conclusion? In addition, permissivist approaches need to explain how, if rationality is permissive (when it is), it remains a guide to the truth: for if rationality permits a range of doxastic responses on some matter, some rational believers will be less accurate than others¹⁴ (e.g. Horowitz 2019).

1.2 Higher-Order Evidence

Perhaps any conciliatory pressure when learning of a peer's differing response may be explained by the suggestion that learning, for the first time, of a peer disagreement provides you with *new* evidence, higher-order evidence. Evidence which bears directly on the truth of a proposition p may be called first-order evidence, whereas higher-order evidence is indirect in its bearing on p : it may reveal something about the character of the first-order evidence, or about how well you evaluated the first-order evidence. So according to this line of thought, in cases of disagreement, although the initial (first-order) evidence on which you arrived at your conclusion seems to you to support, say, p , learning that your peer with comparable evidence concluded instead that p is false ($\neg p$) can give you higher-order evidence that you wrongly evaluated the initial, first-order evidence.¹⁵

For example, Richard Feldman insisted that learning of a peer's reaching a different conclusion, on the basis of the same evidence, amounts to evidence

¹⁴Or, on a credence-accuracy framework, some subjects' credences will be scored as further from the truth, which will presumably (eventually) yield undesirable practical results owing to their credences being less than fully accurate. For a substantial study, see Pettigrew 2018.

¹⁵For helpful discussion of the relation between first-order and higher-order evidence, see Kvanvig 2014, Chaps. 4 and 5.

against one's own conclusion because "evidence that there is evidence for p is evidence for p " (Feldman 2006, 223; 2007, 208).¹⁶ Such a principle makes sense of the idea that learning about peers disagreeing gives me a new sort of evidence for their conclusion. For it says that discovering that a peer concludes differently on the basis of the same evidence E provides me with new higher-order evidence that I have misconstrued what E supports. More specifically, Feldman recently argues for:

EEE₃ If S has evidence, E_1 , supporting the proposition that there is someone who has evidence that supports p , then S has some evidence, E_2 , that supports p . (2014, 292)

EEE₃ could explain why we ought to reduce our confidence in such situations. For if learning about the relevant disagreement provides me with additional evidence against what I had concluded, then respecting this new evidence plausibly requires that I adjust my confidence downward in light of it.

However, EEE₃, as a universal principle, cannot be correct. Suppose that your friend Joe is to guess which one of three objects you are about to put into an empty box: an apple, a ball, or some cheese. Out of his sight, you put in the apple; so you know that there is an apple in the box, but he does not. You then tell Joe that it isn't a ball in the box. Given what Joe knows about the setup, your testimony provides Joe with some evidence there is cheese in the box, because Joe's learning that it's not a ball raises the probability for Joe that it's cheese in the box. This is because when Joe learns that of the three possibilities, it isn't a ball, the probability for him that it is cheese in the box goes up (as does the probability for him that it is an apple). As the antecedent of EEE₃ has it, you have evidence (E_1) that there is someone (namely Joe) who has evidence which supports (p) that there is cheese in the box. But E_1 does not raise the probability for you that there is cheese in the box, because you know there is no cheese in the box. So your knowing E_1 is not, for you, evidence (E_2) which supports the hypothesis (p) that there is cheese inside. (If it were, then by merely telling Joe that what you put in the

¹⁶But see Fitelson 2012 for a swift refutation of this slogan, which also casts doubt on Feldman's EEE₃, considered below.

box is not a ball, you would thereby have acquired some startling evidence that you *didn't* put in an apple. But that's absurd.) So EEE_3 is false.¹⁷

So precise principles about evidence such as Uniqueness, or about the relation of higher-order to first-order evidence, can seem problematic. Another way to think about why disagreements often induce us, when they do, to lower our confidence is that they raise the possibility that the route by which we arrived at our belief may not be reliably related to that belief's being true. Looked at in this way, disagreements bear a similarity to certain debunking arguments which explicitly offer a genealogical account of the causal origins of one's beliefs whose causal paths do not include the truth of what is believed; so if one nevertheless believes a truth, such debunking arguments suggest, it is largely a matter of luck.¹⁸ But disagreements raise such doubt implicitly, without offering any genealogy, since they merely reveal that one of the disagreeing parties must be arriving at their beliefs by a less than ideal route. Once such a doubt is raised, many think that one can typically address the doubt only by having (or finding) some independent grounds for think-

¹⁷ Note that Feldman's replies to anticipated objections to EEE_3 (2014, 296–299) don't apply to this case. For example, it won't do to say that EEE_3 stands because you have some evidence E_2 which, *for Joe*, supports p ; for EEE_3 is supposed to be about how S 's having evidence of someone else's evidence provides evidential support *for S*. Sometimes Feldman replies to objections by noting that S still has evidence, even though it is defeated (such that it is indeed evidence for someone else, who doesn't have the defeater). But in our above case, what proposition would serve as the defeater for you? For the relevant propositions are: (E_1) that there is someone, Joe, who has evidence that there is cheese in the box, (E_2) that you told him that there is not a ball in the box, (p) that there is cheese in the box, and (r), known only to you, that there is (only) an apple in the box. But given what is salient in this case, knowing r amounts to knowing the conjunction of (q) there is an apple in the box and ($\neg p$) there is not cheese in the box. So if one wants to claim that you indeed have evidence for p , that there is cheese in the box, but which is nevertheless defeated, it is defeated by your knowledge that $\neg p$, that there is not cheese in the box. But this is highly unorthodox: for most epistemologists, having rebutting evidence defeats one's knowledge, rather than one's knowledge "defeating" a rebutting defeater. (Note, if one takes this unorthodox road, the more general question looms: what distinguishes cases of knowledge in the presence of such defeaters, from cases where the defeater robs one of knowledge?) It seems better then to abandon such talk and just admit that in this case you really don't "have" evidence for p ; and this is because you know that p is false. (For a related case where knowledge precludes defeat, see Benton 2016, §4; cf. also Kelly 2013, 45. For helpful discussion on providing and having evidence, see Anderson 2018.)

¹⁸For recent debate in epistemology over how problematic debunking considerations are, see White 2010, Vavova 2018, and Srinivasan 2015 and 2019.

ing that one's belief forming methods are indeed the sort that would reliably lead to true beliefs. Moreover, large scale disagreements such as those found among religious groups, along with the demographic distributions of them, can suggest how susceptible many people are to the ways that beliefs pattern among social groups (more on this in section §2.2).

A common way of construing how disagreement accomplishes its epistemic work is to appeal explicitly to the notion of an epistemic *defeater*, which is supposed to defeat the justification one might need in order to know, or even acceptably believe, one's views. Perhaps some disagreements provide one with a defeater even if not by providing one with counterevidence or even with higher-order evidence concerning p itself; and such defeaters, it would seem, can make it rationally mandatory to revise one's belief. Perhaps then in the dinner case, learning that your peer reached a different conclusion defeats whatever it was from your own calculating which justified believing your own conclusion (and realizing the force of this defeater, you rightly reconsider). Thinking about larger scale disagreements, Sanford Goldberg (2013b, 2014, 2015) argues that when the peer disagreements are known to be *systematic*, this presents one with a defeater for the justification one might have for one's belief. Systematic disagreements are (i) widespread, (ii) entrenched, and (iii) non-localized, that is, they involve many related matters rather than the dispute being only over a particular local proposition. Such defeaters are not easily dispensed with (for example, by defeating them with some other evidence which would defeat the defeater), because these disagreements induce the concern that even those who believe truly are, again, somehow lucky to arrive at the truth. Given this, systematic disagreements can seem to rob one's beliefs of justification.¹⁹ Whether this is plausible, however, will depend on an array of details: do such disagreements still defeat when someone carefully arrives at one's view while fully understanding the systematic nature of the disagreements in question (such as in philosophy, or in religion)? Does defeat only occur when the disagreements lead a subject to take seriously the prospect that they've misevaluated the evidence, or does the fact of such

¹⁹Though widely used in epistemology, the viability of knowledge defeat in epistemology has come under challenge: see Lasonen-Aarnio 2010 and 2014, Greco 2010, chap. 10, Hawthorne and Srinivasan 2013, and Baker-Hytch and Benton 2015. See also fn. 17.

disagreements make it the case that one *ought* to take this seriously, whether or not one does so?²⁰ What if, in particular, one’s view predicts or explains why there would be systematic disagreements of the sort in question? Would that be enough to render the defeater inert?

The main idea considered thus far is that learning of disagreements, particularly when they are with peers who seem to have the same or comparable evidence, generates pressure to revise or weaken our opinion; and Conciliationists argue that this pressure reflects something important about epistemic rationality. Yet it is difficult to formulate well-motivated principles which express the normative idea underlying why we ought to revise when it seems that we should. Moreover, some have criticized Conciliationism on a number of grounds which are worth exploring.

1.3 When I Think about You, I Trust Myself

Insofar as some Conciliationists have aimed to offer a universal principle of rationality which would cover all the relevant cases, a common objection is that Conciliationism is self-undermining: if it is true, then we should not be very confident of it, for when applied to itself, it says we should lower our confidence in it. This is because many philosophers, who presumably regard each other as peers and consider all the same arguments, disagree over the truth of Conciliationism. At the very least, by the (unrestricted) Conciliationist’s lights, such a Conciliationist should not be very confident of their own view.²¹ Even worse, a philosopher inclined toward Conciliationism thus has reasons from peer disagreement to become not very confident in *any* of their philosophical views, given the presence of capable philosophers who disagree with them (see Goldberg 2013a). Similar thoughts apply to equal weight views of Conciliationism: to accept such an equal weight view, given philosophers who disagree, one has to “inconsistently both be very confident that it is true and not very confident that it is true” (Weatherson 2013, 55).

Thomas Kelly (2005, 2010, 2011) raises several concerns for versions of Conciliationism, even for idealized cases. One worry is that deferring to one’s

²⁰This would be a special kind, a *normative* defeater. See Lackey 2008, 45 and 198ff.; Goldberg 2016 and 2017; and Benton 2016 for concerns.

²¹See Elga 2010; cf. Pittard 2015b and 2020 for a way out.

peer by reducing one's confidence can look like an illicit double-counting of the evidence. Suppose we each begin with the same evidence set E bearing on whether p , and after evaluating E , we share our findings: I conclude that p whereas you conclude that $\neg p$. If I treat your contrary belief, reached from *your* evaluation of E , as an added reason to believe $\neg p$, then I've allowed E to have additional evidential weight (processed through you) beyond the weight I've already given it. And somewhat awkwardly, in doing this, I would be treating the fact that you believe $\neg p$ on the basis of E , as a reason for me to believe $\neg p$, even though you wouldn't yourself regard your believing that $\neg p$ as an additional reason—on top of E —for believing $\neg p$ (Kelly 2005, 187ff.). But it would be illicit for you to use the fact that you believe $\neg p$ on the basis of E as *further* reason, on top of E , to believe $\neg p$: it would seem like a sort of bootstrapping²² to use your own belief in this way to increase your confidence in what you believe.²³ Yet if it would be problematic for you to use your belief that $\neg p$ in this way, why should it be okay for me to use your belief to increase my confidence in $\neg p$?

Another worry, at least for Equal Weight versions of Conciliationism which assume Uniqueness, is that doing what they advise can lead one *away* from the rational attitude required by Uniqueness. Suppose there is a fact about the degree to which evidence E supports p , namely, that it makes p 0.8 probable, and that we each only have E bearing on p . Upon evaluating E , suppose that your credence in p is, quite rightly, 0.8, whereas I botch it, quite unreasonably arriving at a credence of 0.2. In such a case you got it exactly right, fulfilling the uniquely rational doxastic attitude given E . But when we discuss E and our conflicting credences over p , the Equal Weight view requires that you must, to be rational, split the difference with me and we must both

²²See Weisberg 2012.

²³Indeed, this consideration is part of why Conciliationists oppose a view on which one can remain steadfast in one's belief in the face of such a disagreement: for it would beg the question against one's disagreeing peer to reason, "Well, you believe that $\neg p$, but E supports p (as I believe), so clearly, your belief is mistaken." However, Lasonen-Aarnio 2015 argues against the idea that learning of others' opinions may function as higher-order evidence for one, whereas learning of one's own cannot: "it is at best implausible and at worst incoherent to allow evidence about the (present) doxastic states of others to have a certain kind of epistemic import, but not to allow evidence about one's own (present) states to have that kind of import" (269–270).

then be 0.5 confident in p . But to do this would be for you to *depart* from the uniquely rational attitude toward p given E. Thus the Equal Weight view results in making the original E irrelevant to the bearing of our new evidence (which includes E but also includes the facts about what credences we had reached upon consulting E) on p ; the actual evidence E bearing on p gets completely swamped by psychological facts about what the two of us believe (Kelly 2010, 123–124). What is more, the Equal Weight view arguably cannot be spelled out in plausible way in a Bayesian framework while also capturing all the intuitions of the cases marshalled in its support, unless it disrespects some of the very principles which motivated it (Lasonen-Aarnio 2013).²⁴

Concerns like these have led some philosophers to argue that often enough, when encountering some peer disagreements, one can nevertheless rationally remain *steadfast* in one's belief. Such views insist that the facts about who reasoned correctly, or best evaluated the evidence, or gets (closest to) the truth, play a role in who may rationally maintain their belief, for what is rational here is not simply a matter of judging who is most likely to be in epistemic error from the internal, first-person perspective.²⁵ On Kelly's "total evidence" view, for example, parties to such disagreements must take into account both the first-order evidence on which they each initially arrived at their conclusions, as well as the higher-order evidence gained from learning about the disagreement. But in some cases it may be that the first-order evidence is strong enough to allow one party, who assessed it correctly in fact, to maintain their belief, even if they lose a bit of confidence. On this view, whether it is reasonable for one party to remain steadfastly in their belief is not separable from whether they are getting it most right (Kelly 2013, 35).²⁶

²⁴Lasonen-Aarnio argues that it is subject to a trilemma: it violates intuitively correct updates (conditionalization), it imposes implausible restrictions on prior credence functions, or it is non-substantive. What is worse, she argues that any blanket view of disagreement is subject to a similar worry.

²⁵See van Inwagen 2010, Hawthorne and Srinivasan 2013, Kelly 2010 and 2013, Weatherston 2013, and Titelbaum 2015 (esp. 282ff.).

²⁶There are, of course, lots of cases where one quite reasonably is unmoved by a disagreement, such as when confronting a conspiracy theorist (see Kelly 2013, 40–46, discussing a Holocaust denier; or compare someone who denies climate change; etc.). But in such cases, it is far more plausible to judge that they have not considered all of the evidence, or have unreasonably discounted much of it. So these tend to be uninteresting cases of non-peer

Even more strongly, Hawthorne and Srinivasan (2013) argue for a knowledge disagreement norm, on which “one should be ‘conciliatory’ in the face of disagreement—that is, give up one’s belief that p and trust one’s disagreeing interlocutor that not- p —just in case so trusting would lead one to know that not- p ,” whereas “one should be ‘dogmatic’ in the face of disagreement—that is, dismiss one’s interlocutor and continue to believe p —if one knows that p ” (2013, 12). Such a view supposes that even in many disclosed disagreements, one of the parties can, in some cases at least, count as knowing their conclusion, despite the standard assumption made by most philosophers above, that such disagreements change each party’s evidence, or at least defeat one’s justification or knowledge.²⁷ Even if one takes on their (controversial) view that one party’s knowledge might survive in a context of disagreement, Hawthorne and Srinivasan also accept that knowing is not always transparent to the knower,²⁸ and thus their proposed knowledge disagreement norm is not, as they acknowledge, perfectly operationalizable (2013, 15ff.). This aspect of their view will dissatisfy those who expect from a norm of what one ought to do that one be well-positioned to discern, and to carry out, what the norm requires in a given situation.²⁹

Some may worry that any non-Conciliationist view will sanction a problematic stance of dogmatism in the face of disagreement, and that such a stance contributes to the phenomenon of *belief polarization*.³⁰ When people with incompatible views are presented with mixed evidence bearing on those

disagreement.

²⁷Hawthorne and Srinivasan (2013, 21–25) are unimpressed by the extant work arguing for easy knowledge defeat. Cf. also fn. 19.

²⁸Using Williamson’s terminology (2000, chap. 4): where a condition C is *luminous* just in case whenever one is in C , one is in a position to know one is in C , whereas C is *absence-luminous* just in case whenever one is not in C , one is in a position to know that one is not in C ; and a condition is *transparent* just in case it is both luminous and absence-luminous. Williamson (chap. 4) argues against the luminosity of knowledge, and of mental states more generally.

²⁹Astute readers will notice that the debate between Conciliationists and (some forms of) Steadfasters mimics the broader rivalry between internalists and externalists in epistemology. Looked at another way, the former seems to prioritize avoiding error, whereas the latter prioritizes believing the truth (in terms of William James’ twin epistemic goals: James 1912, 17). I leave it to readers to draw out any significant ramifications of such parallels.

³⁰See Lord, Ross, and Lepper 1979, and Kelly 2008.

views, people tend to interpret the evidence in such a way that minimizes the evidence against their own view while allowing the evidence for their view to increase their confidence in it (and it may be that certain sorts of cherished domains, such as politics, morality, or religion, lend themselves more easily to the evidence looking rather mixed). Such responses exacerbate the extent of the disagreement, as each side hardens in their commitments. Approaches to peer disagreement which permit Steadfast responses might be objected to on the grounds that they seem to give cover to each side of a disagreement: inasmuch as each party treats their own side with partiality in their handling of the evidence, or avoids proper engagement with the contrary evidence when it is encountered, they are to that extent fostering belief polarization by irrational means. Arguably, however, what best explains the occurrence of belief polarization is not some normative view (such as Steadfastness), nor (in some cases) confirmation bias, but rather the fact that people tend to devote more cognitive effort to scrutinizing heavily the evidence which does not comport well with their own view, so as to explain it in other ways (Kelly 2008).³¹ Doing so means that one assesses the counterevidence against a broader background of alternative hypotheses, and thus it has a smaller evidential effect for the party which disagrees; whereas each party will tend to spend less time and effort scrutinizing the evidence which supports their view (Kelly 2008). It is possible for such attentive scrutiny to be the result of epistemic humility in one's own view, if such differential treatment manifests a respect for opposing positions. And a habit of closer scrutiny of the counterevidence is obviously compatible with the spirit of Conciliationism, should one allow that counterevidence to reduce one's confidence in one's view (even if such reduction is muted in part by the mixed nature of the evidence).

We have so far explored in some detail the concepts at play in recent work on the epistemology of disagreement, including grounds for offering, or questioning, normative principles which have been proposed about what one should do when learning about different sorts of disagreement. Let us now turn to disagreement over religion.

³¹For those who want to conclude that such a practice is unreasonable, Kelly notes that the empirical sciences proceed in just this way (2008, 624).

2 Disagreement over Religion

Many of the central questions raised above were originally posed by philosophers who had their eye on the significance of religious disagreement (especially Gutting 1982; Alston 1988, Hick 1988, 1989, and 1997, van Inwagen 1994, 41–46, and 1996, 139; Plantinga 1995; Rosen 2001, 83–87).³²

Religion is a controversial domain: religions distinguish themselves by making various claims about the supernatural, humanity, and how to live. Even among religious adherents who share certain core religious commitments, there remains much disagreement between sects or denominations, and even within narrow denominations, over doctrine, worship, spirituality, the afterlife, religious or spiritual leadership, and so on. Insofar as it is possible to demarcate major religions in terms of their core traditions, texts, and doctrinal agreements, we may call disagreements between those within a religion as *intra-religious* disagreement. More central to our purposes are disagreements between major religions, such as disagreements over the nature of the divine or the supernatural, what sacred texts are divinely inspired or otherwise canonical, how God or the supernatural has manifested itself in historical events, who counts as a prophet or divine messenger, how to practice spirituality, and so on. Such differences distinguish, say, Islam from Christianity, each of these from Buddhism or Hinduism, and so on. This is *inter-religious* disagreement. But of course, contributing to the overall diversity concerning religion are the many non-religious or irreligious, particularly atheists, who think that nearly all positive claims (at least about the existence of the supernatural) are false. This we may call *extra-religious* disagreement. For simplicity's sake, we shall begin by focusing on the basic positions of the theist, atheist, and agnostic (one who has not yet decided what to believe).³³

³²For overviews of the issues applied to religious disagreement, see King 2008, Basinger 2015, Pittard 2015a, King and Kelly 2017, and Benton 2019. For in-depth discussions, see the collections Kraft and Basinger 2016, and Meister 2011, as well as the monographs Kraft 2012, Axtell 2018, De Cruz 2019, and especially Pittard 2020, which is state of the art.

³³By 'theist' I mean to be as broad as possible: someone who thinks that an extremely powerful, extremely knowledgeable, and extremely benevolent being exists. By 'atheist' I mean one who thinks ultimate reality is at bottom just the physical, natural world, and there are no spiritual truths or practices worthy of our attention. Given these labels, a non-theistic Hindu or Buddhist, for example, would be religious but not count as an atheist (nor a theist).

Later we will consider how questions about disagreement surface related to inter-religious disagreement.

One swift application of the ideas from the last section is to suggest that the fact of extra-religious disagreement puts conciliatory pressure on any theist (or other religious view such as non-theist Hinduism), and on any naturalistic atheist, to reduce their confidence in their view. Even if we allow that there will be varying sorts of experiences and evidence, and that not everyone will count as one's "peer," the sheer numbers of those who disagree with one's own stance on religion ought to give one pause that one is getting it right.³⁴ Looked at this way, widespread extra-religious disagreement looks like it supports the agnostic who insists we should suspend judgment on what stance on religion is correct, and continue to examine all such worldviews.³⁵ But when considering whether such agnosticism is justified, one weighing up atheism versus a broadly religious worldview (theistic or otherwise) might insist that it also matters that the broadly religious outlook manifests large scale *agreements*, against the atheist, about the nature of ultimate reality and the life most worth living. Indeed, one might argue that this feature of extra-religious disagreement blunts any apparent pressure to be agnostic, and could even provide some weight in favor of a broadly religious worldvie³⁶ (we shall consider this in more detail when we look at common consent arguments later). Looked at this way, it is unclear that Conciliationist considerations should automatically push one toward agnosticism. But if so, what of the choice between atheism and a religious worldview? Presumably, one should sincerely assess any available arguments and evidence.

However, complicating matters are concerns about what counts as evidence in the religious domain; whether some forms of evidence are more probative than others; and whether one must grant more weight to public

³⁴However, see White 2018 for a challenge to the idea that *if* there is an epistemological problem of the diversity of opinion, it only gets worse in a larger universe with more diversity.

³⁵This is roughly the position Feldman (2006, 212–213) lands upon, which, he acknowledges, is a challenge to his preference for atheism.

³⁶Imagine we find that g people independently agree on p , but those g disagree on more specific claims q, r, s, \dots , each of which entail p ; whereas we find 1 person who thinks that $\neg p$, and thus disagrees with the g . We are unlikely to be moved by an argument to the effect that, because those g disagree over the more specific claims q, r, s, \dots , we should suspend judgment on p .

or shared evidence.³⁷ In epistemology more generally, the main methods of belief formation (or sources of evidence, if you like) are perception, testimony, and reasoning (arguments). But reasoning from arguments is typically thought to be more trustworthy when they involve premises or experiences which are universally available or involve shared common ground. Thus philosophical arguments such as the cosmological or fine-tuning arguments, or arguments from evil and suffering, often present themselves as publicly available and neutral reasoning about, say, whether there is a theistic God. By contrast, those who appeal to religious experience (Alston 1991, Swinburne 2004, Ch. 13) as a kind of perceptual evidence for God's existence typically conceive of such evidence as inherently private. Even though religious experience, as with sensory experience, seems to provide a sort of direct evidence (as opposed to indirect grounds offered by reasoning or testimony), some argue that with religious experience at least, its private nature weakens any epistemic support it might give to the would-be believer.³⁸

Testimony from trusted individuals can form another kind of ground for belief (or disbelief), and social epistemologists have debated the conditions under which we can acquire knowledge purely on the basis of another's say-so.³⁹ Perhaps we can even consider the testimony of, or from within, an entire tradition (cf. Zagzebski 2012; MacIntyre 1988). When it comes to testimony about religion or the existence of the supernatural, there are questions about whether testimonial grounds could justify religious belief; yet some have argued about that such testimony can appropriately ground religious beliefs even in the midst of religious diversity (Baker-Hytch 2018). But the epistemic force of such testimony may depend whether the testifier functions as an authority or as a kind of expert advisor (see Lackey 2018). Moreover, most reflective individuals will weight the value of these distinct sources—arguments, testimony, and religious experience, one's own or others'—in very different

³⁷For a broader introduction to issues of knowledge and skepticism in religious epistemology, see Dunaway and Hawthorne 2017. For recent insights and new directions, see Benton, Hawthorne, and Rabinowitz 2018.

³⁸Where its inherent privacy results in its untestability; for this worry, see Martin 1952 and 1959; see Alston 1991, 209–211 for a reply. Cf. also James (1994 [1902], 460–462), who argued that some mystical experiences could provide strong evidence to their subjects, but not to anyone else.

³⁹For a recent sampling, see Lackey and Sosa 2006; Lackey 2008; and Goldberg 2010.

ways. This confers on such sources the problem of how best to appraise these kinds of evidence, particularly when there is such great variation in peoples' exposure to, and their relative evaluations of, such evidence.

Finally, and relatedly, there is plausibly no dispute-independent standard of the epistemic credentials by which one might be judged one's epistemic "peer": for example, philosophically minded atheists may think that only one's capacity for intellectual reasoning matters, whereas certain religious views may claim, say, that purity of heart or selfless love for others is a precondition of learning the truth about God or the supernatural (see Pittard 2015a, §4). How would one decide which view, if either, is more correct? Or, to take another example, what do we make of someone (perhaps a close friend) who claims to have had a vivid and mystical religious experience, and on this basis they convert to a religious life? Those who have not had such a religious experience, yet are sympathetic to religion, might now regard this friend as an epistemic expert of a kind, whose testimony should be given strong weight. Whereas a religious skeptic will likely rule out such an experience, if really had, as easily explained on other psychological or naturalistic grounds; given this, the skeptic may insist that such experiences should not count as evidence for religious claims at all. Thus even if there were consensus on what kind of evidence in the religious domain is most probative, there is no dispute-neutral way of assessing which epistemic credentials one must have in order to properly assess that evidence.⁴⁰

2.1 What does Religious Disagreement Reveal?

So it appears that disagreement over religion, whether extra-religious or inter-religious, is something of an intractable problem: whether investigating the extra-religious dispute over whether to entertain a religious worldview at all, or evaluating inter-religious disagreements in order to choose between religions, sincere inquirers should examine as much of the arguments and evidence as they can. And yet deciding what counts as strong evidence, or determining how to evaluate different (possibly conflicting) sources, are tasks

⁴⁰This problem may extend to proposals on which what matters isn't having the same evidence, but rather that one should judge another a peer when they are (roughly) as justified, given their evidence, in holding their religious beliefs: see Lackey 2014.

fraught with difficulty.

Some take the fact of such intractable disagreements to offer us a lesson or two about religious reality. One natural approach sides with the sensibilities of Conciliationism, and suggests that such disagreement (or learning that it is widespread and entrenched) provides the religious believer with a defeater of their justification, which at best downgrades how confident they should be of their own religious view, and at worst, provides an argument for religious skepticism.⁴¹ But if the former, such that one should be less confident, the result should be more humility and respectful tolerance for other religions.⁴² Yet we shall consider three stronger applications of such ideas, those found in debunking arguments, an argument from divine hiddenness, and an argument for pluralism about religious truth.

2.2 Debunking and Irrelevant Influences

Some argue that the demographic distributions of religious disagreement provide a debunking argument against religious belief, for it seems as though we are strongly influenced to believe what those around us also believe. Thus, the worry goes, what we end up believing seems highly contingent, depending largely on the society and culture in which we were raised. But such correlations look like they hold whether or not the beliefs are true. Thus religious diversity, in the patterns we find it, raises the concern that if one's religious beliefs are largely correct, this is somehow a matter of luck (recall our discussion from §1.2).

This observation is not new. The medieval Muslim theologian al-Ghazālī (ca. 1058–1111) acknowledged this concern:

As I drew near the age of adolescence the bonds of mere authority (*taqlīd*) ceased to hold me and inherited beliefs lost their grip upon me, for I saw that Christian youths always grew up to be

⁴¹See Feldman (2006, 212–213), cited above, as well as Bogardus (2013a), Bergmann (2015 and 2017), and King (2016), who also assess how the argument to skepticism might be resisted. Contrast Thurow (2012), who argues that extra-religious disagreement, given the equal weight view, can provide evidence *for* theism, when deployed in a Bayesian framework.

⁴²See especially Quinn 2006, Ch. 13 and 14, and Quinn 2002, 533–537 (excerpts reprinted in Kraft and Basinger 2016).

Christians, Jewish youths to be Jews, and Muslim youths to be Muslims. (Watt 1994, 19)

Similarly Descartes (1596–1650), in *Discourse on the Method*, noted:

I thought, too, how the same man, with the same mind, if brought up from infancy among the French or Germans, develops otherwise than he would if he had always lived among the Chinese or cannibals; and how, even in our fashions of dress, the very thing that pleased us ten years ago, and will perhaps please us again ten years hence, now strikes us as extravagant and ridiculous. Thus it is custom and example that persuade us, rather than any certain knowledge. (Cottingham et al., 1985, 119; AT 16)⁴³

Note that these arguments depend upon the fact of religious diversity, and the ways such traditions manifest themselves globally (though similar concerns have been raised about other views, including views in philosophy⁴⁴). If we instead learned of a global environment where there was great religious diversity but sociological facts about religious adherence did not reveal such tight clustering with the culture in which one was raised, it would be much harder to raise this debunking worry.

Why might we think of such socio-cultural forces as being *irrelevant* influences when it comes to religious commitment? After all, we find similar such tight clustering in other domains: for it is also a sociological fact that Parisians tend to know what the Eiffel Tower is and exactly where it is located, whereas those raised in Bangladesh may not even have such beliefs. So what about religious beliefs and their diversity, exactly, makes them vulnerable to the objection that there are irrelevant influences in play? Katia Vavova (2018, 136) argues that we should understand an irrelevant influence as follows:

⁴³See also J.S. Mill (1975 [1859], Chap. 2): “And the world, to each individual, means the part of it with which he comes in contact; his party, his sect, his church, his class of society... Nor is his faith in this collective authority at all shaken by his being aware that other ages, countries, sects, churches, classes, and parties have thought, and even now think, the exact reverse. ... it never troubles him that mere accident has decided which of these numerous worlds is the object of his reliance, and that the same causes which make him a Churchman in London, would have made him a Buddhist or a Confucian in [Beijing].”

⁴⁴See White 2010; see also Korman 2014 on related concerns about perception.

An irrelevant influence (factor) for me with respect to my belief that p is one that (a) has influenced my belief that p , and (b) does not bear on the truth of p .

Thus an important difference between the tight clustering of beliefs about the Eiffel Tower among Parisians, and the non-beliefs (or even false beliefs) of others is one we can make sense of given the truth that the Eiffel Tower is in Paris, and so Parisians are mostly likely to know about it. But with religious diversity, there appears to be little reason to suppose that the socio-demographic clustering of religious commitments can be easily explained by which religion might be true; rather, it looks more plausible that we are likely to adopt the dominant religious perspectives of our upbringing, whether or not they are true. (Notice that parallel considerations apply to one who might've been raised in a largely secular environment, so this is plausibly not only a problem for religious adherents.) It's not just that had you been raised elsewhere and formed your beliefs in comparable ways (in part by learning from those around you), you easily might have believed falsely;⁴⁵ it's rather that, without any other guide to what is true of religion, forming one's beliefs in these ways looks arbitrary, guided primarily by what dominates one's communal context.⁴⁶

Importantly, however, the mere fact of religious diversity need not require one to conclude that contingent facts about one's social and cultural upbringing count as an irrelevant influence. For, in order for such facts to be an irrelevant influence, they must not bear on the truth of the matter (Vavova's clause (b)). But we will properly judge that such facts of upbringing do not satisfy (b) only when we have examined carefully what the truth of religion is, or, having made such investigations, found them inconclusive. So such factors will only look to be irrelevant to the truth for one who lacks any independent grounds for thinking that their religious outlook is more correct than the alternatives. If it is possible to study religious worldviews other than one's own

⁴⁵If so, then epistemologists would say your belief forming methods are unsafe, and safe methods are arguably required in order to know (e.g. Sosa 1999; Williamson 2000, 123ff.). However, see Bogardus 2013b for the idea that one sometimes could have knowledge even with unsafe belief (religious belief or otherwise).

⁴⁶For more on such concerns, see Axtell 2018, and De Cruz 2019, chap. 2.

and satisfy oneself that the best evidence and arguments support a particular religious outlook, one may then argue that demographic facts about one's upbringing are not playing a large casual role in what one believes. Indeed, it would be precisely in virtue of such honest study that one would be guided by an assessment of what seems most true, rather than complacently believing what is most comfortable given one's upbringing.⁴⁷ Similarly for one who, having investigated the matter, converts to a new religious perspective from whatever outlook with which one was raised: the mere fact of changing one's view after having examined its merits suggests that one has not been merely swayed by what is familiar and communally accepted.⁴⁸

2.3 Divine Hiddenness

A different sort of argument, due to J.L. Schellenberg (1993, 2015), draws on (extra-) religious disagreement in order to conclude that there can be no God, at least of the Christian, perhaps broader monotheist, sort.⁴⁹ Not all people seem to have experiences of God, nor are all exposed to comparable reasoning or testimony about God; but even when they have some of this evidence, many find the evidence mixed, and thus they do not believe that there is a God. So there appear to be many who are not culpable in resisting the evidence, but simply find it inconclusive. So if there is a God, God is in this sense "hidden" from some. Yet this can seem contrary to what we would expect if God is loving and wants to be in personal relationship with everyone. As Schellenberg argues (in its most succinct form):

- (1) There are people who are capable of relating personally to God

⁴⁷Sometimes the irrelevant influences worrier about religious belief seems to assume that most people whose beliefs largely conform to the worldview with which they were raised have not subjected their beliefs any honest scrutiny nor explored much of the evidence. But if we learned instead that a majority of people in a given society have, in fact, critically evaluated the evidence or arguments over their worldview during their lives (even though the majority of them continue to hold roughly those same beliefs), it would be unclear whether the irrelevant influences concern still has much force.

⁴⁸Note that the pursuit of the truth through such investigation seems crucial here; one who converts purely to enter into a marriage, for example, still seems subject to the irrelevant influences objection.

⁴⁹McGinnis 2015 argues that it would not be an argument against medieval Islamic understandings of God, which are not personal and relational in the relevant senses.

but who, through no fault of their own, fail to believe that God exists. (“non-resistant” non-believers)

- (2) If there is a personal God of love, then there are (would be) no such people.
- (3) So: There is no personal God of love.

This argument depends on the existence of disagreement (or at least, non-agreement) over theism, but only requires there to be some who are “non-resistant” in their unbelief: Schellenberg’s argument would presumably extend to a scenario where all religious adherents practiced only *one* religion, but where there remained some who sincerely find the evidence or arguments for it lacking. For Schellenberg then, the possibility of reasonable non-belief somehow demonstrates the non-existence of (a certain sort of) God.

Much has been written about this style of argument from divine “hiddenness.”⁵⁰ And for many theists, it can be easy to challenge both of its premises. But at its heart it asks why, if there is a God, would there not be agreement on that matter? Indeed, more significantly, why would there be such *diverse* views about religion and the nature of the supernatural, particularly if there is a divine being that desires us to know or practice the right religion?⁵¹ Notice, however, in light of the social demographic patterns adverted to in the last section, that we already have at hand some (perhaps incomplete) sociological explanations of why fairly entrenched patterns of religious diversity might persist. Additionally, because theistic worldviews normally have built into them an account of why there is extra-religious disagreement, it is unclear that there is a significant further explanatory burden for them here.⁵²

2.4 Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism

Concerns about the epistemological upshots of such diversity often invoke additional issues such as how much is at stake for those whose religious views

⁵⁰For some recent work, see Green and Stump 2015, Anderson 2017, Rea 2018.

⁵¹See Marsh and Marsh 2016. See also Nathan King’s contribution to this volume, for how issues of hiddenness enter into what he calls the “apologist’s dilemma.”

⁵²See, for example, Dumsday 2012a and 2012b, and Baker-Hytch 2016.

(or lack thereof) are getting things wrong—do matters of salvation or an afterlife, or enlightenment, or nirvana, depend on practicing the right religion? (Or worse, is punishment on offer for those who do not believe or practice the right religion?) Once these questions are raised, it can seem all the more important that one believe and practice the true religion.

Normally people assume that, if there is a religious or supernatural reality, some particular religion is the correct (or most true) one (an assumption we have made up until now). Thus one's religious beliefs will be true or false, and some one religion's claims will presumably most approximate the truth, even if it makes some false claims. And if there is one religion whose tenets are true or mostly true, then the tenets of other, differing religions are to varying degrees false insofar as their tenets are untrue.⁵³ Of course, for some religions, believing some of these truths might be crucial to one's salvation or end state as redeemed, enlightened, and so on. So it is common to distinguish between *exclusivist* religions which only grant redemption to the believers or practitioners of the one (most) true religion, and *inclusivist* religions (or interpretations of them) which insist on there being a single (most) true religion, but do not insist that only the believers or practitioners of that religion, during their earthly lives, will be redeemed.⁵⁴

One might ask, however, whether the great range of religious diversity, both intra-religious and inter-religious, provides support for a different meta-theory of how one's own religious view relates to the others. John Hick (1989) contends that such diversity supports a *pluralism* on which a divine being of

⁵³Note that, even given their distinct tenets, the common commitments of various religions mean that some of their overlapping claims might be true: for example, if there is exactly one divine being, who created the universe, the monotheistic religions (such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) all agree in this truth. But if Christianity, say, is true, then Judaism's and Islam's denial of many specific Christian claims (such as that Jesus is God incarnate) would mean that these denials are false.

⁵⁴Inclusivist positions are prominent in Judaism (the Noahide Laws or *Brit Noah* extend salvation to those who follow seven commandments; cf. Gen. 2:16 and 9:4–6). They are also found in Islam (Qur'an, 2:256; 2:62; 32:7; see also Khalil ?); and in Christianity (at least on a straightforward interpretation of Paul's letter to the Romans, chap. 11; cf. also Matt. 7:21–23, and 25:31–46). The twentieth century Catholic theologian Karl Rahner popularized an inclusivism with his view (unfortunately named) that there can be "anonymous Christians" (1976, 283). For more in-depth discussion, see Jonathan Kvanvig's chapter in this volume, "How to Be an Inclusivist."

some kind is the revelatory source of all religions, but where the revelatory process necessarily involves cultural reception which influences how different groups adopt and interpret religious claims. Thus we have different religious perspectives such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (among many others) which are geographically and historically situated such that the dominant cultural concepts and social priorities end up influencing how each understands the divine. Thus Hick's approach can easily explain the demographic patterns of religious commitment. In addition, he can appeal to the widespread agreement among such religions about morality and the spiritual life, insisting that in their essentials, they converge on a common ethic and orientation to a transcendent reality outside ourselves. Looked at one way, Hick's line can seem correct: a pluralist picture, where each religious tradition is accurately (if incompletely) referring to some core features of supernatural reality while also reflecting varying cultural concepts, can appear to be a better explanation of religious diversity than a particularist exclusivism (or an inclusivism) on which only one religion is the most accurate account of the supernatural. In this sense then, the sorts of religious diversity we find globally are evidence for pluralism (call this *abductive pluralism*, because it offers a best-explanation account of why we find the patterns of religious diversity). But on the assumption that this pluralist picture is correct, it raises many further questions. One question is in virtue of what it would be rational to commit to, or to practice, any particular religion. Another question is why, if pluralism is correct, it is rarely a part of the doctrine of so many religions. For while many religious traditions are inclusivist or otherwise tolerate respectful dissent, almost no major religion embraces the idea that it is just as true (namely, not very true) as all the other major religions. Thus if abductive pluralism gains some support from the fact of religious diversity, it also seems at a loss to explain why so few religions have been tolerant enough to allow for such a pluralistic diversity.

However, Hick's articulation of his view is complicated by the places in which he appears to go anti-realist about religious truth, insisting that religions' claims about ultimate reality do not conflict logically, and are neither true nor false: they are instead merely "mythologically true" such that they "tend to evoke an appropriate dispositional attitude" for those who endorse

them (1989, 348); and “what are called conflicting truth-claims... do not in fact conflict, because they are claims about different human awarenesses of the divine” (2001). But this *anti-realist pluralism*, in my view, loses any explanatory advantages its abductive cousin might have held, because it is not in the business of offering a meta-theory on which all such religions are on a par; nor can it plausibly contend that there is inherent value in any core agreement over an ethical or spiritual life. Finally, an anti-realist pluralism has fewer resources to offer a soteriological story on which genuine practitioners of all religions (or at least the major ones?) will be redeemed or saved or be granted a good afterlife; nor can such an anti-realism plausibly claim that such religions even guarantee redemptive transformation in *this* life. For if religions’ varying claims about ultimate reality or how to live are “neither true nor false,” how can religions make good on promises to redeem us from our flaws, let alone deliver some sort of salvation or (good) afterlife?

Alvin Plantinga (1995) argues forcefully that the fact of religious diversity, and the pluralist’s handling of it, need not make a religious exclusivist suspect that their own religious beliefs suffer from any irrationality or epistemic defect, or that maintaining such an exclusivism need involve intellectual arrogance or imperialism. Yet Plantinga allows that acknowledging the diversity of religious perspectives could (though might not) defeat the knowledge which the believer might otherwise have had in the absence of such acknowledgment (1995, 214–215), particularly if it leads one to the irrelevant influences worry that one believes as one does largely due to the religious culture into which one was born. In this way, knowing more about diversity may lead to less religious knowledge, at least in the short run. Yet again, much will depend on the method by which one gained such knowledge (if knowledge it is) in the first place. If one has in fact gained knowledge of theism, say, by direct acquaintance with the truth of theism (either by apprehending the soundness of an ontological proof, or by perceptual acquaintance with God), it is entirely unclear why acknowledging disagreement must undermine that knowledge.⁵⁵

⁵⁵Cf. Bogardus 2013a for similar points. *Mutatis mutandis* if theism is false and it’s possible to know, by “seeing” directly, that theism is false: acknowledging disagreement from theists might not dislodge the atheist’s knowledge. For discussion of how secure such knowledge might be (either the atheist’s or theist’s, depending on which is true), see Benton, Hawthorne, and Isaacs 2016, esp. §12.

Notice that exclusivists, as well as some inclusivists, will presumably care about the considerations favoring Conciliationism in the face of realized religious disagreement, for they will suppose that it can matter a great deal that one believe or follow the one (or most) true religion. To that extent then, following Conciliationist advice might be thought to aid one in (eventually) reaching the truth. By contrast, pluralists might be less moved by Conciliationist motivations, and may well find Steadfast views appealing insofar as they offer some support to the idea that it can be rational to stick with one's current religious worldview (if one practices a major religion): for at least on an abductive pluralism, any inter-religious disagreements we find between world religions belie the common agreement they have underneath it all, and so learning of such religious diversity should do little to make one less confident of one's own specific religious tradition. (It is far less clear what an anti-realist pluralist would make of either the Conciliationist or Steadfast lines of argument; in what follows, I shall mainly have in mind the abductive pluralist.)

Motivations for (abductive) pluralism can seem structurally analogous to an argument aimed at cutting through some problems of inter-religious disagreement.⁵⁶ Common consent arguments,⁵⁷ in their most modest versions, appeal to the large number of people who believe that p , and then suggest that this common consent can at least provide significant evidence for p . While our focus so far has been on religious disagreement, the common consent arguer aims to capitalize on the widespread popularity—both currently and historically—of theism,⁵⁸ in order to claim that, while not decisive, this fact is at least some evidence in favor of theism. Whereas the pluralist might argue in similar ways that the broadly popular and near universal acceptance of some transcendental religious reality is some reason to think it is real. While treating common consent as evidence for theism (or religion in its broadest sense) might seem initially implausible, notice that more generally, broad agreement

⁵⁶It is unclear whether they provide any solace in the face of extra-religious disagreement, namely between atheists, agnostics, and religious (theistic or non-theistic).

⁵⁷See Kelly 2011, Zagzebski 2012, 185ff., and Matheson forthcoming.

⁵⁸At least a strong supermajority. Kelly 2011, 146, n. 18 cites one sociologist (whose avowed goal is to show that non-belief is more prevalent than typically thought) who estimates that around 88 percent of the global population is theist.

(even if not unanimous consensus) that p arrived at independently provides some evidence in favor of p . It does so because the truth of p can figure in the best explanation of how broad agreement would have been reached, at least if there are other plausible assumptions about how so many would have arrived at the belief that p .⁵⁹ However, where people reach agreement that p in dependent fashion (such that their reaching the same conclusion is due to collaboration or external pressure), most will deny that broad agreement is evidence for p . Note also that *disagreement* over p , if reached independently, can (if there are sufficiently many on each side) provide reason to suspend judgment: for those who found themselves confident that p (or that not- p), independently reached disagreement offers higher-order evidence that one misjudged the initial evidence. But disagreement similarly loses its force if one learns that such disagreement arose in *dependent* fashion.⁶⁰ So common consent arguers for theism will need to make the case for enough independence among those in broad agreement that theism is true.

3 Contributions to this Volume

The contributors to this volume take up a number of the issues raised above relating religious diversity and disagreement to epistemological issues. In many cases they also pose fascinating new questions about, and offer intriguing answers on, how to theorize about religious truth, religious understanding, and decisions over religious or non-religious worldviews.

Laura Frances Callahan, in “Disagreement, Testimony, and Religious Understanding,” maintains that questions about appropriate responses to religious disagreement are related to questions about appropriate responses to religious testimony. Callahan argues that if it is appropriate to alter one’s credence in a religious proposition on the basis of encountering a disagreeing

⁵⁹See Kelly 2011 for thoughtful discussion.

⁶⁰Suppose one learns that ten people believe that p , while ten believe that not- p . But one also learns that their beliefs were formed by each telling the next, one by one, what they believe, and they were lined up in such a way that the next listener was always inclined to distrust and believe the negation of what their informant told them. In such a set-up, the existence of such a balanced disagreement would not lead one to revise one’s belief, if one believed that p (or if one believed that not- p).

peer, it is also appropriate to alter one's credence in a religious proposition on the basis of encountering a testifier who is at least as competent and informed as oneself, when one is antecedently unopinionated on the matter at hand. However, recent literature on moral testimony should give us pause, in assuming that it is generally appropriate to alter one's credences in religious propositions purely on the basis of encountering putatively trustworthy testifiers. Callahan suggests that, in many religious cases as in many moral cases, there is distinctive value or importance in acquiring not merely knowledge but understanding. The distinctive importance of understanding in the religious and moral domains generates a reason not to engage in doxastic practices that threaten or disincentivize understanding in these domains—such as changing one's doxastic attitudes purely on the authority of another's testimony. She claims that it is often inappropriate to adjust one's credence in a religious proposition purely on the basis of encountering a testifier, no matter how competent and well-informed. This suggests that it may often also be inappropriate to adjust one's credence on the basis of religious disagreement, for the reason that in so doing one would threaten or disincentivize religious understanding.

Sanford Goldberg, in "How Confident Should the Religious Believer be in the Face of Religious Pluralism?", defends various arguments from religious diversity or disagreement which purport to support skepticism regarding justified (or rational) religious belief. Goldberg explores the prospects for resisting these sorts of argument. He notes that those who would resist can (i) downgrade her disagreeing interlocutor(s), (ii) appeal to epistemic permissivism, (iii) argue that the believer is no worse off, epistemically speaking, than the atheist or agnostic non-believer, or (iv) argue that the principles that convict the faithful of irrationality overreach, and would establish a more widespread skepticism about rational belief. After presenting what Goldberg regards as the best version of the argument from diversity or disagreement, he then argues that any believer who hopes for truth will not get much solace from any of these responses.

Margaret Greta Turnbull, in "Religious Disagreement is Not Unique," argues against a common approach taken by some epistemologists, who insist that religious disagreement is distinctive from other sorts of disagreements,

and that this distinction changes whether religious disagreements demand a conciliatory response. More specifically, these epistemologists have argued that religious disagreement has special features which make it possible for theists to resist conciliatory arguments according to which they must adjust their religious beliefs in response to finding that peers disagree with them. Turnbull considers the three most prominent features which are claimed to make religious disagreement distinct: religious evidence, evaluative standards in religious contexts, and religious transformative experience. She argues that these three features fail to distinguish religious disagreement in the ways that others have thought. However, she also shows that the view that religious disagreement is not a unique form of disagreement makes religious disagreement *less*, rather than more, worrisome to the theist who would prefer to rationally remain steadfast in her religious beliefs.

In a similar spirit, Richard Feldman argues in “Is there Something Special About Religious Disagreement?” that there is nothing special about *disagreement* as compared with other cases of mixed evidence, and further, that there are no principles governing *religious* disagreements that differ from those governing other disagreements. Rather, in all such scenarios and for all domains, including religious matters, one should endeavor to follow the evidence. Feldman thinks that what is typical about such contexts is that they typically provide circumstances wherein one should be conciliatory toward those who disagree by reducing one’s confidence, because learning about others who disagree tends to shift the weight of one’s evidence, even if only slightly, away from what one already believes. Yet he examines how complicated it might be to discern such evidential pressure, particularly when it bears on one’s fundamental or “core” religious beliefs. Along the way he considers how religious experiences, along with the recognition that others have not had such experiences, may figure in what sorts of evidence one has with respect to religious matters.

Joshua Blanchard and L.A. Paul, in “Transformative Experience and the Problem of Religious Disagreement,” take up the issue of how religious diversity affects the decision over whether to adopt a particular religious worldview, given that such a conversion can transform who one becomes. Religious pluralism presents religious believers, agnostics, and skeptics alike with an

epistemological problem: how can confidence in any religious claims (including their negations) be epistemically justified? There seem to be rational, well-informed adherents among a variety of mutually incompatible religious and non-religious perspectives, and so the problem of peer disagreement inevitably arises in the religious domain. Blanchard and Paul show that the transformative nature of religious experience and identity poses more than just this traditional, epistemic problem of religious belief. In encountering one another, believers, agnostics, and skeptics confront not just different beliefs, but different *ways of being a person*. To transition between religious belief and skepticism is not just to adopt a different set of beliefs, but to transform into a different version of oneself. They argue that the transformative nature of religious identity intensifies the problem of pluralism by adding a new dimension to religious disagreement, for there are principled reasons to think we can lack epistemic and affective access to potential religious, agnostic, or skeptical selves. In addition, Blanchard and Paul reflect on the relationship between the transformative problem of religious pluralism and the more traditional question about which religious beliefs are true.

Nathan King, in “The Apologist’s Dilemma,” considers the position of the theistic apologist. Such a person seeks to provide rational arguments for her belief that God exists. In today’s intellectual milieu, she must do so with a keen awareness of religious diversity and disagreement. However, in an intellectual setting that calls for epistemic humility, the apologist faces a dilemma concerning the rational force she takes her arguments to have. This dilemma concerns the Uniqueness Thesis—roughly, the idea that for a given body of evidence, E, precisely one doxastic attitude toward E is epistemically rational. Should the apologist embrace Uniqueness or not? There appear to be pitfalls either way. If the apologist embraces Uniqueness, then she seems committed to the claim that those who reject her arguments are irrational—a result that can seem arrogant and overbearing. This might seem to suggest that the apologist should deny Uniqueness and instead embrace the idea that rationality is permissive: for some bodies of evidence, E, more than one doxastic response to E can be rational. However King points out that adopting this position appears to come at a cost: it seems to commit the apologist to the claim that even in the face of her apologetic arguments, someone might

be rational in not embracing theism. That is, despite her arguments, rational non-belief occurs. Inasmuch as the latter claim is a key premise in atheistic arguments from divine hiddenness, denying the Uniqueness Thesis seems to raise the specter of atheism. In sum, this is the Apologist's Dilemma: either embrace Uniqueness at the cost of losing humble apologetics, or deny Uniqueness at the cost of skirting atheism. King aims to further articulate this Dilemma and explore possible responses to it.

John Pittard, in "Rationalist Resistance to Disagreement-Motivated Religious Skepticism," considers the question: when is it reasonable to maintain confident religious (or irreligious) belief in the face of systematic religious disagreement? Pittard argues that the answer to this question depends in large measure on the scope of what may be called *partisan justification*: roughly, a subject has partisan justification for her belief that p when she is reasonable in having a degree of confidence for p that exceeds an impartial estimate of her cognitive reliability on the matter. He considers a number of different views on the nature and scope of partisan justification, and defends a rationalist account according to which partisan justification is grounded in rational insight and is not available in disagreements with acknowledged rational parity. Pittard then explores some implications of this rationalist account for religious belief. One such implication is that "reformed epistemology,"⁶¹ which deemphasizes the role that *rational insight* and *rational assessment* play in the formation and justification of religious belief, does not have the resources to adequately defend religious belief in the face of skeptical worries raised by religious disagreement.

Jonathan Kvanvig, in "How to Be an Inclusivist," examines in detail a meta-theory of the relationship between religious truth and salvation or redemption. Inclusivism is designed to be a middle position between Exclusivism and Pluralism, but current formulations suffer from limitations. First, Karl Rahner's own version of the view is put in Christian terms, but if the view is supposed to be metatheoretic, it needs a formulation that is neutral as to the truth of any particular religion. Second, attempts to generate such neutrality run into the difficulty of being unable delineate exactly what distin-

⁶¹See especially Plantinga 2000, Alston 1991, and Wolterstorff 2010 (esp. Chaps. 8, 11, and 12). For an overview, see McNabb 2019.

guishes this middle position from fully relativistic Pluralism. The solution to both problems, Kvanvig argues, is to adopt a broader understanding of faith, one that is not centrally cognitive, one which explains why faith is a generic virtue in any context, and one which gives a way of distinguishing Inclusivism from its alternatives. The key element of Kvanvig's proposal is that, if faith is not centrally cognitive, there is nothing about this attitude that makes an appeal to it a partisan one with respect to the universe of faiths. That result allows a religion-neutral metatheoretic stance that can nonetheless avoid Pluralism by allowing the redemptive value of a religion to be located in the one true religion, as Rahner maintained, but without implying that the story of salvation appeals to cognitive attitudes constitutive of saving faith.

Katherine Dormandy, in "The Loyalty of Religious Disagreement," argues that religious disagreement, like disagreement in science, stands to deliver important epistemic benefits.⁶² Religious disagreement, like disagreement in science, stands to deliver important epistemic benefits. But within religious communities, engaging with others who disagree tends to be frowned upon. A salient reason for this is that, whereas scientists should be neutral toward the topics they discuss, theistic believers, it is thought, should be loyal to God; and religious disagreement, they claim, is disloyal. For if one is a religious theist, engaging with disagreement often involves discussion with people who believe more negatively about God than you do, putting you at risk of forming negative beliefs yourself. And forming negative beliefs about someone (in certain sorts of relationships), or even being open to doing so, is disloyal. A loyal person, says the objector, should instead exhibit *doxastic partiality*, doing their best to believe positively about the other party even at the cost of accuracy. Dormandy discusses two arguments from doxastic partiality that aim to show that religious disagreement is typically disloyal. She argues that *even given* doxastic partiality, religious disagreement is not typically disloyal, and can in fact be loyal. But she also argues that doxastic partiality is false. A superior form of loyalty, she argues, is *epistemically oriented*, namely, concerned with knowing the other party as they really are. This opens up new ways in which religious disagreement is not only not disloyal to God, but can be loyal.

Finally Isaac Choi, in "Democracy of the Dead? The Relevance of

⁶²Extending arguments developed in Dormandy 2018a, 2018b, 2020.

Majority Opinion in Theology,” explores how to think about indicators of expertise and discernment of the truth in theological doctrines. Should we prefer the majority opinion in theology, whether it be the majority opinion over the history of the church (as in G. K. Chesterton’s “democracy of the dead”) or the majority opinion of contemporary theologians? Choi argues that because of the vast differences in accessible evidence between past and present-day theologians, diachronic majority opinion is problematic. In the synchronic case, ignorance of minority arguments, biases, selection effects, and the difficulty to deciding who gets to vote present many opportunities for majorities to be wrong. Finally, Choi considers whether a Christian doctrine of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit can rescue the democracy of the dead, but he concludes that given the gentle way God might correct people, diachronic majority opinion, apart from belief in a very basic set of truths, is not epistemically bolstered by the Spirit.⁶³

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