

## 1 How Should We Respond to Religious Disagreement?

### 1.1 The Significance of Religious Disagreement

In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it?

(Smith, 1902, 4)

Joseph Smith grew up in a religiously diverse community in New York (Palmyra and Manchester) during the Second Great Awakening (about 1790–1850s). He came into contact with many religious (mainly Christian) denominations, including Methodism, Presbyterianism, Baptism, but also with folk religious magic, which was practiced in his family. The open disagreement between these religious groups, which were trying to win converts, troubled him. Whom should he trust?

Presbyterians were most decided against the Baptists and Methodists, and used all the powers of both reason and sophistry to prove their errors, or, at least, to make the people think they were in error. On the other hand, the Baptists and Methodists in their turn were equally zealous in endeavoring to establish their own tenets and disprove all others. (Smith, 1902, 3–4)

The fifteen-year-old Smith solved this conundrum by retreating into the woods and asking God for guidance. This eventually led to a series of visions, which in turn led him to establish a new religious movement, the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints (also known as Mormonism). Put in epistemological terms, Smith's solution to the problem of religious disagreement was to try to seek additional evidence, in his case, in the form of revelation.<sup>1</sup> This example illustrates that religious disagreement constitutes some form of evidence. It is a peculiar form of evidence, in that it does not directly bear on the truth or falsity of religious beliefs, but rather on us as epistemic agents. When confronted with conflicting viewpoints, we sometimes try to gather more information, as in Smith's case. Disagreement is thus a form of *higher-order evidence*. Higher-order evidence has a few peculiar features. For example, its value seems to be dependent on who is evaluating it. If Kabita disagrees with Dan about the epistemic credentials of Buddhism, then Kabita's beliefs are higher-order evidence for Dan, but not for Kabita. It would indeed be a bit peculiar if Kabita said, "I am a very thoughtful sort of person, and I am a Buddhist. My belief must constitute some evidence for Buddhism!" She would be hubristic, to say the least. But it is not at all unusual if Dan took Kabita's belief

<sup>1</sup> This account of Joseph Smith's "first vision" is canonical among Mormons, but it is somewhat idealized. For a more nuanced account, see Taves (2016).

as some form of evidence, thinking along the following lines, “I know Kabita is a thoughtful sort of person. If she is a Buddhist, maybe Buddhist beliefs – about enlightenment, reincarnation, and the like – are not as outlandish as I thought they were. Maybe there is something I am missing.” This asymmetry merely demonstrates that disagreement constitutes evidence that is relative to the agent, not that it would be irrelevant (Christensen, 2010; Matheson, 2009).

Joseph Smith’s case also illustrates another feature of religious disagreement: recognizing its epistemic significance has a practical, real-world impact on the religious beliefs we hold. Once we see that people who are just as thoughtful and well informed as we are come to very different religious viewpoints, we can no longer go on taking our own religious views for granted. Nicholas Wolterstorff (1996) draws a distinction between analytic and regulative epistemology. Analytic epistemology, according to Roberts & Wood (2007, 20), aims to produce “theories of knowledge, rationality, warrant, justification, and so forth, and proceeds by attempting to define these terms.” By contrast, regulative epistemology is a more practically oriented way of thinking about these concepts; it tries to provide guidance for how to shape our doxastic practices (Wolterstorff borrows the term “doxastic practice” from Alston [1991]). A doxastic practice is a system of habits by which we form our beliefs. Regulative epistemology proposes doxastic practices that help us acquire beliefs that are responsibly formed. They can, for instance, be aimed at obtaining as many true beliefs as we are able, or they can be more risk averse and help us avoid making mistakes. As James (1902) already noted, there is sometimes a tension between these two desired states of affairs (believing true things and avoiding believing false things), so a risk-seeking person might be more inclined to believe what is not certain, while a risk-averse person would avoid it.<sup>2</sup> Thus a doxastic practice needs to specify first what epistemic utility we would like to obtain, for example, obtaining true beliefs, avoiding false beliefs, or avoiding false beliefs of specific kinds. Once specified, it can help us obtain these utilities. Regulative epistemologies are often borne out of a concrete need, which is precipitated by a social and intellectual crisis (Wolterstorff, 1996). In the case of Descartes and Locke, this was the unraveling of the medieval Christian consensus in the seventeenth century. To provide a simplified picture of what happened, at the end of the Middle Ages the general consensus on moral and factual matters weakened as a result of several factors.

<sup>2</sup> See Pettigrew (2016) for a recent formal argument that vindicates James and that shows that it is rationally permissible for epistemic risk seekers to go significantly beyond the evidence and believe something for which they can never have incontrovertible evidence, such as the existence of the external world, of other minds, or of God.

These included the increasing recognition that there was a wide diversity of religious beliefs across the world, due to increasing contact with foreign cultures as a result of colonialism and trade. Reports of religious beliefs in other cultures were often secondhand, not systematically collected, and distorted. Nevertheless, they provided evidence that religious beliefs varied considerably, and that monotheism was not universal. As Hume (1757, 2) summarized it, “no two nations, and scarce any two men, have ever agreed precisely in the same sentiments.”

As we will see in Section 4, observations like these weakened the argument from common consent for theistic belief, the argument that theism must be true because it is universal. Added to this was the growth of experimental science, which showed that many religious claims, such as about the age of the earth or the origin of species, were false. Further epistemic shifts occurred with the end of logical positivism in the middle of the twentieth century. Logical positivism sought new epistemic certainty by appeal to empirically verifiable statements. With its downfall, it became clear that scientific findings could not take on the role that formerly religious dogmas had played in the Middle Ages. Today, we may be experiencing another epistemic crisis, the increasing polarization and tribalization of beliefs, exacerbated by political echo chambers. For example, a study by Gauchat (2012) shows that from the 1970s onward, scientific beliefs have become increasingly politically polarized in the United States. Given this, what doxastic practices should we adopt? The aim of this Element is to be regulative, rather than analytic, even though it will use tools of analytic epistemology. I will not here attempt to make a comprehensive survey of religious disagreement in all its different forms. Rather, I will examine what practical conclusions we can draw in the face of particular forms of religious disagreement.

## 1.2 Conciliationism and Steadfastness

Let’s for the moment assume that disagreement about religion has some evidential value (I will respond to some objections to this claim later in this section). Social epistemologists have been debating how we should respond to this evidence. Take this example, adapted from Clayton Littlejohn (2013):

**Complacent atheist:** Clayton is a complacent atheist: he strongly believes there is plenty of evidence against the existence of God. However, he is also aware of the fact that there are several philosophers who believe in God. Many of these have thought carefully about the matter and are experts in epistemology, metaphysics, and other relevant philosophical subdisciplines.

Two broad lines of response are open to the complacent atheist. The first option falls under the umbrella of conciliationism. The conciliatory position<sup>3</sup> holds that we should revise our opinions, or become less confident of them, in the face of disagreement with someone we consider to be an epistemic peer about the subject matter. So if Clayton believes that, say, Linda (a theist philosopher) is just as thoughtful and epistemically virtuous as he is, and that she has access to the same body of evidence, he should revise his beliefs. Maybe he should suspend judgment on the issue entirely and become an agnostic, as Feldman (2007) recommends. If he does not wish to go this far, he should at least become less complacent in his atheism, say, move his credence<sup>4</sup> that atheism is true from .9 to .7 (depending on whether he believes he should lend equal weight to Linda's views).

A second option is to remain steadfast, and not change one's credences at all. There are several motivations for remaining steadfast, which may apply in a religious context. For example, Wedgwood (2007) points out the epistemic asymmetry between my own (religious) experiences and evidence, both of which guide me directly, and those of others, which can only guide me indirectly. This asymmetry explains why a vivid religious experience can have strong evidential force for me, but not for the person I tell my religious experience to. Indeed, there is an impressive collection of religious experiences in James (1902), and more recently in the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre, which has collected more than 6,000 reports since 1969. These experiences have a specific phenomenology, for example, "The experience was unbelievably beautiful, and I will never forget the quality of that bright white light. It was awesome." But their evidential force is hard to convey to third parties.

Note that conciliationists do not always change their views. For one thing, conciliationists have not given up their belief that conciliationism is right in spite of encountering many epistemologists who disagree with them. Under some circumstances it is reasonable to stick to your original beliefs, for instance, when it is more likely that the other party has made a mistake. But if you do not have any independent reason to think that your interlocutor, with whom you disagree, has made a mistake, conciliationism does require significant belief revision. Epistemologists have proposed several principles that would separate these two ways of responding to disagreement. One of these is the independence principle:

<sup>3</sup> See Christensen (2011) for an in-depth explanation of this terminology.

<sup>4</sup> An agent's credence in a proposition that  $p$  measures her degree of confidence in  $p$ .

**Independence:** In evaluating the epistemic credentials of another's expressed belief about  $p$ , in order to determine how (or whether) to modify my own belief about  $p$ , I should do so in a way that doesn't rely on the reasoning behind my initial belief about  $p$ . (Christensen, 2011, 2)<sup>5</sup>

This principle can help reasoners guard against blatant circular reasoning (“Well, of course, since atheism is true, Linda must be wrong”) and encourages epistemic humility. It maps out plausible courses of action in many cases of peer disagreement, such as Christensen's (2007) classic mental math case. In *mental math*, two restaurant goers split the bill and end up with different calculations of how much each owes, after adding the tip. It seems commendable to lower your credence in your original belief, say, that you each owe 23 dollars, in the face of the other person who has come up with a different amount, say, 26 dollars. However, sometimes a disagreement does not constitute evidence against one's own belief, but against the view that the other person is one's epistemic peer. Jennifer Lackey (2010) imagines the following situation, termed *elementary math*: I find out that my friend Harry thinks that  $2 + 2 = 5$ . This should not lead me to revise my belief that  $2 + 2 = 4$  but rather lower my opinion of Harry's arithmetical capacities. Clayton could, in a similar vein, conclude that Linda is woefully misled about the question of God's existence, even if she is in general an excellent philosopher. Examples like these indicate that our intuitions about what to do in the face of disagreement will diverge depending on what the disagreement is about. And as we will see, the causes of the disagreement are also relevant.

This Element will examine different forms of religious disagreement (or agreement), and what we can learn from them. It is written in a broadly conciliationist spirit: I am working from the assumption that religious disagreement does provide higher-order evidence to one's religious beliefs, and that it should impact one's beliefs. In the next sections, I will look at disagreement with possible selves, with former selves, the epistemic significance of agreement about religion, the problem of religious expert disagreement and conclude by outlining the significance of philosophy of religion in religious disagreement. In each of these scenarios, I will show how conciliationism provides the right response, and how – at the same time – it does not mean we should necessarily become agnostic about all religious matters. The reason we should not be agnostic is that our own cognitive background constrains and colors the way we evaluate evidence. This allows us to maintain religious beliefs in many

<sup>5</sup> We will look at another proposed key principle that separates conciliationism and steadfastness, namely uniqueness, in Section 2.

cases, while nevertheless taking the religious beliefs of other people seriously, and often also revising our beliefs in the light of them.

Section 2 examines what it means to be in disagreement with possible selves: what if you had been born and raised in Afghanistan, where 99 percent of the population is Muslim, or in Papua New Guinea, where 99 percent is Christian? In all likelihood, you would have ended up holding the majority belief. Should this worry you? I will argue that it should not, but that the role of irrelevant influences still poses a problem at the macro level, specifically in constraining the range of viable hypotheses in the philosophy of religion. Section 3 looks at disagreement with your former self: if you converted to a different religious affiliation, can you be confident that your present belief is more likely to be right? I will argue that because religious conversion is epistemically and personally transformative, you cannot assume that this is the case. The best way to evaluate the beliefs of a convert (including yourself) is to engage in reasoned debate. Augustine's arguments in *De utilitate credendi* (*On the usefulness of belief*) will illustrate this approach. Section 4 looks at the flipside of disagreement, namely, the epistemic significance of agreement, in particular agreement about the existence of the supernatural. I will examine the argument from common consent, its merits and problems. Section 5 will analyze how we ought to respond to disagreement among religious experts. It looks at models of expertise and the proper response to expert disagreement. I propose a new model of expertise, the expert-as-teacher, incorporating advice offered by Maimonides in his *Guide of the Perplexed*. Section 6 concludes by showing that philosophical reflection can play a constructive role in religious debate.

I will now consider three arguments against conciliationism in the face of religious disagreement. The first is that religious disagreement is too messy and complex to be of philosophical interest. The second is that religious beliefs are insensitive to evidence and, therefore, cannot be revised in the light of higher-order evidence, rendering the discussion moot. The third is that relevant evidence in religious disagreement, such as religious experience, is private and cannot be shared between parties.

### 1.3 Is Religious Disagreement Philosophically Intractable?

Clear-cut cases like mental math elicit conciliatory intuitions: if I have no reason to think that I am better at mental arithmetic, it would seem prudent to be less confident when my epistemic peer and I come up with different numbers. But what about religion, politics, and all those other messy cases where we frequently find ourselves in disagreement? Maybe the concept of epistemic

peer is not useful in such cases, as Adam Elga (2007) and others have argued. Suppose the belief we are interested in is the existence of God, as conceptualized in the Abrahamic traditions. Belief in this being is so tied up with our other beliefs, including political and moral beliefs, that it is hard to assess to what extent the other person is an epistemic peer. Kelli Potter (2013) has argued that in many cases it is difficult to gauge whether a religious disagreement is genuinely a disagreement.

Given the messiness of religious disagreement, one can see why the philosophy of disagreement – in spite of a clear and continued interest in the topic – tends to use clear-cut examples such as restaurant bills and simple visual perception, instead of real-world religious cases. However, excluding messy cases from epistemological consideration would leave us none the wiser about the rational status of beliefs we genuinely care about, such as in politics, philosophy, religion, and morality. We cannot use toy examples to reason our way into the more complex cases, in part because these toy examples already elicit differing intuitions (compare mental math with elementary math).

Arguably, the most interesting cases of disagreement occur when parties come with different sets of background beliefs. In some of these cases, the parties concerned consider their interlocutors to be peers, even though they do not know if the other person has exactly the same evidence or is equally virtuous. Can people in such cases still be called epistemic peers? It depends on one's notion of epistemic peerhood. The term "epistemic peer" was originally coined by Gary Gutting (1982), who described epistemic peers in terms of intellectual virtues. Aisha and Benjamin are epistemic peers if they are similar in attentiveness, thoroughness, and other virtues. Although this is the oldest definition of epistemic peerhood, and it is not often used in the recent literature, my survey on religious disagreement among academic philosophers (De Cruz, 2017) reveals that it is still popular. Sixty percent of surveyed philosophers favored a definition of epistemic peers as similar in intellectual virtues. Subsequent definitions focused on cognitive equality (Lackey, 2010), where Aisha and Benjamin are epistemic peers if they are similar in their cognitive capacities and limitations, and on evidential equality (Christensen, 2007), where they are epistemic peers if they have access to the same evidence for the domain under consideration. Sameness of evidence is a difficult criterion to meet. Even people who are closely matched in training and expertise, such as dissenting philosophers of religion, will not have access to the same evidence (e.g., they will have read different papers, gone to different graduate schools). Even peers who have access to the same evidence may not have assessed it correctly: perhaps they disagree fundamentally on which theoretical virtues to

use in their discussion, such as simplicity, fruitfulness, generality, and coherence with background knowledge (Douven, 2010). Different weightings of such virtues could lead to divergent appreciations of natural theological arguments, such as the cosmological argument.

Suppose that we do not know whether parties have the same evidence, are cognitive equals, or are equally virtuous; does this make their disagreement epistemically irrelevant? This does not seem to be the case. Even if one's interlocutor is an epistemic inferior, such as an undergraduate student versus a professor, the disagreement does constitute some (albeit weak) evidence. There are, of course, many cases where we do not need to heed our epistemic inferiors (e.g., if my five-year-old and I come up with different numbers in a mental math problem, I do not need to revise my confidence that my calculation is right). But in many situations, we simply do not know if a person is in as good an epistemic position as we are (King, 2012). This is not just in messy religious disagreements but also even in more clear-cut cases such as mental math: Aisha may believe that she and Benjamin are equally good at mental arithmetic, but in reality Benjamin is significantly weaker.

Lackey (2010) favors the concept of *ordinary disagreement*. In a case of ordinary disagreement, Aisha and Benjamin consider themselves to be epistemic peers on the topic prior to their disagreement, and they come to realize that they disagree. In such situations, while we do not know whether the two parties are evidentially or cognitively equal, the mere fact of disagreement constitutes (defeasible) evidence. At the very least, the disagreement should lead us to inquire further into the other's position, by looking at the reasons he or she might have for holding it. For the purposes of this Element, I will understand epistemic peer disagreement as *ordinary disagreement*, unless otherwise specified.

#### 1.4 Is Religious Disagreement Insensitive to Evidence?

A second worry for the philosophical discussion of peer disagreement is that religious beliefs might not be sensitive to evidence in the same way as ordinary beliefs are. When we argue about religion, it is not uncommon to hear appeals to personal satisfaction and meaning. When religious believers try to win converts, they will say things such as "Having a relationship with Jesus brings me joy!" rather than "Here are some reasons why I think the existence of God is more likely than God's nonexistence." Neil Van Leeuwen (2014) has argued that religious credences are largely insensitive to evidence. To Van Leeuwen, the belief "God is watching me" is cognitively distinct from the belief "The police are watching me." The latter belief would



be vulnerable to evidence; the former would not. Religious beliefs are vulnerable to special authority, by people who are respected in their religious community and who fulfill a special role there. Although this claim that religious credences are insensitive to evidence is a descriptive one, not a normative one, it has repercussions for the epistemology of religious disagreement. How could we use religious disagreement as higher-order evidence if it were genuinely the case that our religious beliefs were psychologically invulnerable to evidence?

There is substantial evidence that religious beliefs are processed in a peculiar way. For example, Larissa Heiphetz and colleagues (2013) examined how adults and children reason about beliefs (both their own and those of other agents). They found that young children (aged five and older) already draw a distinction between fact-based beliefs (e.g., the size of germs) and opinion-based beliefs (e.g., which color is the prettiest). When asked whether two agents who disagreed about an opinion (e.g., whether broccoli tastes good) could both be right, children and adults tended to think that both agents could be right. For factual beliefs, they thought only one agent could be right. Religious beliefs fell somewhere in between, with adults responding at chance level about whether both agents could be right. Andrew Shtulman (2013) found that undergraduates are more likely to refer to authorities when justifying their belief in the existence of religious entities (e.g., angels, God, souls), compared to their belief in the existence of scientific entities (e.g., fluoride, electrons, genes).

However, religious beliefs are not unique in this way. Politically polarized beliefs such as beliefs about climate change and evolutionary theory in the United States show the same pattern of resistance to evidence, a pattern that might be explained by processing fluency (Levy, 2017). Although religious beliefs are intimately tied to factors such as personal identity and meaning, they still are to an important extent about factual matters (the same holds for political beliefs). This is why attempts such as Gould's (2001) non-overlapping magisteria, which aims to neatly separate the domain of science as the domain of statements of fact and the domain of religion as the domain of ought statements, fail. It is in practice often not possible to separate the factual claims from normative or preference ones in religious statements. If religion did not make any statement of fact but made only claims about value and ethics, these claims could not be justified using purported facts. For example, one could not argue that one should love one's neighbor because it pleases the Creator, because that is a (purported) statement of fact (God is pleased by neighborly love) (Worrall, 2004).

### 1.5 Private Evidence and Religious Disagreement

Peter van Inwagen (1996) has argued for the steadfast view by appealing to private evidence. We frequently have some (incommunicable) insight or experience that we might suppose the other person lacks. This can act as a symmetry breaker: when we have good reasons to think we have insight the other party lacks, there is no reason to move our beliefs in their direction. In a case that has become something of a classic in the epistemology of disagreement, van Inwagen expresses his puzzlement that David Lewis, a philosopher he admires, disagrees fundamentally with him about whether free will and determinism are compatible – van Inwagen thinks they are not; Lewis thought they are. To break the symmetry, he argues that he has some sort of special insight that Lewis, for all his perspicacity, lacks:

But how can I take these positions? I don't know. That is itself a philosophical question, and I have no firm opinion about its correct answer. I suppose my best guess is that I enjoy some sort of philosophical insight . . . that, for all his merits, is somehow denied to Lewis. And this would have to be an insight that is incommunicable – at least I don't know how to communicate it – or I have done all I can to communicate it to Lewis, and he has understood perfectly everything I have said, and he has not come to share my conclusions. But maybe my best guess is wrong. (van Inwagen, 1996, 138)

This example demonstrates how adopting the steadfast view can erode the notion of epistemic peer: if van Inwagen believes his alleged epistemic peer to lack some insight he possesses, he does not really consider him a peer (at least not about the question of free will), but sees himself as in a superior position. What are we to make of such private evidence? In the religious domain, the obvious candidate for incommunicable, unshareable private evidence is religious experience. But atheists may also have nonpropositional, non-inferential evidence for their position. The occurrence of evils such as the suffering of innocent children may give the atheist an experience of God's nonexistence (Gellman, 1992).

Religious experiences are common, but less common than religious beliefs. A survey among ordinary believers by the Pew Forum indicates that 59 percent of Americans regularly have religious experiences,<sup>6</sup> which make them less common than the number of Americans who believe in God (around 90 percent in the same survey), or than people who consider themselves members of a religious denomination (more than 70 percent). Anthropological research by Tanya Luhrmann among evangelical Christians of the Vineyard communities in Palo Alto and Chicago indicates that religious experiences are dependent on

<sup>6</sup> [www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/chapter-2-religious-practices-and-experiences/](http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/chapter-2-religious-practices-and-experiences/)