

## Chapter 9: “In Abundance of Counsellors There is Victory”<sup>1</sup>: Reasoning about Public Policy from a Religious Worldview

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[in: *Religious Truth and Identity in an Age of Plurality*, eds. Oliver Wiertz and Peter Jonkers, London: Routledge (2020), 162-181.]

### Abstract

Some religious communities argue that public policy is best decided by their own members, on the grounds that collaborating with those reasoning from secular or “worldly” perspectives will only foment error about how society should be run. But I argue that epistemology instead recommends fostering disagreement among a plurality of religious and secular worldviews. Inter-worldview disagreement over public policy can challenge our unquestioned assumptions, deliver evidence we would likely have missed, and expose us to new epistemic alternatives; when done respectfully, it can also combat epistemically problematic biases and groupthink. I address two objections that members of a politically active religious community might raise: one that inter-worldview disagreement about public policy is not needed because one’s own beliefs are already true, and another that it is not needed because one’s own belief-forming processes are divinely guided.

### Introduction

Religious communities are often active in the public sphere, aiming for influence in politics by getting their members and sympathizers elected to public office. Seeking to maximize one’s influence is part of the rough-and-tumble of politics in a democracy. But some religious communities pursue this aim not just for practical reasons, but also for *epistemological* ones. Their rationale is that their own religious worldview has a firm grasp on truths about right and wrong, whereas other viewpoints – prominently secular ones – neglect important values and so are likely to yield public policy that is mistaken, not least because it is morally impoverished.<sup>2</sup>

One way to express this rationale is as the claim that certain sorts of discussion, dissent, or disagreement on public-policy matters should be suppressed, so that a particular viewpoint, one taken to be correct, can dominate.<sup>3</sup> Expressed this way, the epistemic rationale of the religious communities that I have in mind butts up against a common tenet of scientific reasoning: that disagreement, far from being suppressed, should be actively encouraged.<sup>4</sup> The idea is that lively disagreement from a diversity of perspectives promotes true beliefs and related epistemic goals, as differing viewpoints challenge and complement each other.

Scientists claim this, of course, because they do not assume themselves to be in possession of the truth, and recognize that a measure of epistemic friction<sup>5</sup> can spur them to improve their theories. But certain politically active religious communities will claim that, unlike scientists,

they know that their beliefs are true, and moreover that their reasoning is subject to divine guidance, so they do not stand to gain epistemically from engaging in disagreement, certainly not about public policy.<sup>6</sup>

But I will argue that religious communities that take this view are mistaken. Even if their worldview is largely on track, they nonetheless stand to gain epistemically by engaging in disagreement about public policy with adherents of different large-scale worldviews, including secular ones.

I will call this sort of disagreement *foundational-worldview disagreement*. The situation I have in mind is something like this: Community 1 adheres to large-scale belief system *B*, from which it reasons to the policy recommendation *P*. Community 2, by contrast, adheres to large-scale belief system *B\**, which is incompatible (in some significant way) with *B* and from which it reasons to public-policy recommendation *not-P*. A familiar contemporary example is the debate over abortion rights, where religious communities often argue on religious grounds that it should be illegal, and secular communities on secular grounds that abortion should be allowed.

My claim can be summarized as follows:

**The plural-discourse claim:** Engaging in foundational-worldview disagreement over public policy has the strong potential to yield epistemic benefits on public-policy matters.

By “engaging in disagreement” I mean open-mindedly discussing public policy in a way that enables you to understand and critique your interlocutor’s view and him to understand and critique yours.<sup>7</sup>

The plural-discourse claim does not say that that foundational-worldview disagreement is *always* epistemically beneficial. On the contrary, sometimes it will be of little use, for example if the foundational worldview of one’s interlocutor is epistemically or morally beyond the pale – think of white supremacists or flat-earthers.<sup>8</sup> (Indeed, scientists limit their claims about the benefits of scientific disagreement too, to those with the requisite training.) What the plural-discourse claim says is just that, such cases aside, we stand to learn much about the right public policy for our society from people who disagree with us about it, even – or perhaps especially – when their disagreements stem from fundamental differences between our religious or secular worldviews. As a result, restrictions on the worldviews used in public-policy reasoning will typically (with a few exceptions) come with an epistemic cost. Even if a politically active religious community were to gain a big enough majority that they could legislate as they pleased, they would do well, from an epistemic point of view, to invite disagreement with adherents of other foundational worldviews.

My argument for the plural-discourse claim will initially take an *a fortiori* form: I will argue that disagreement in general yields epistemic benefits, and thus that so does foundational-worldview disagreement about public policy. I will then address two objections that a politically active religious community of the sort I have in mind might make, each to the effect that their community poses an exception (section 3). The first objection (section 4) arises from the claim that their worldview beliefs are true, and the second (section 5) from the claim that they are guided by divine cognitive influence. *Even if the community is right about both of these things*, I will argue, the plural-discourse claim applies.

I will start (section 2) with some setup.

## Public-Policy Reasoning and Disagreement

Each person has an interlocking network of beliefs, concepts, and values that I will call her *belief system*. Belief systems have subsets that pertain to different domains, and that relate to other subsets in complex causal, psychological, logical, and epistemic ways.<sup>9</sup> Many people's belief systems contain a subset comprising a foundational worldview, such as a religious or secular stance; and many contain, similarly, a subset pertaining to matters of public policy. I will be discussing how these subsets relate epistemically – in particular when it comes to *using* the resources of foundational worldviews to reason about public policy.

Public-policy reasoning centres around two types of question. What I'll call *the question of ends* concerns which public ends (e.g. income parity, poverty reduction, etc.) are the best to promote in the situation at hand, all things considered. *The question of means* concerns which policies are the best suited to realizing these ends. The latter question must take account of not only the causal efficacy of a given policy with respect to desired ends, but also the values and disvalues incurred by the policy itself. Public-policy reasoning, like reasoning of any sort, is done by situated agents within the context of their own belief systems. It will be useful to say more about the three elements – beliefs, concepts, and values – that these involve; I will do so by illustrating them as they might arise in belief systems about public policy, though similar remarks apply to religious belief systems.<sup>10</sup>

*Beliefs* about public policy concern the ends and means at issue, as well as any auxiliary matters needed to think about them – including what epistemic standards to use in evaluating the belief system itself. Beliefs bear all manner of epistemic relations to each other, such as entailing, making probable, supporting, and the like.

Second, belief systems contain *concepts*. These are the building blocks for beliefs. Consider the belief that it is good to increase income equality. What this belief means depends on the particular concept of (or measure for) income equality that is at issue, as well as on the underlying notion of goodness.

Third, public-policy reasoning involves *values*: the placing of things in preference orderings by some measure of importance, perhaps including, but not limited to, their moral goodness. Values determine our public-policy ends: Do we value the reduction of income inequality more than the reduction of the national deficit, or vice versa? Values also help determine our beliefs about which means are best suited for bringing those ends about. For example, of two policies conducive to reducing income inequality, which brings more good and less bad into the world on balance? (Values also determine the concepts of “good” that we favour.) In addition to determining what beliefs we hold about ends and means and how we conceptualize them, values determine the *topics* on which we form beliefs and concepts to begin with. For it is our values that prompt us to care enough about a matter to articulate beliefs and concepts to describe it.

Beliefs, concepts, and values – about public policy and other matters – are subject to epistemic evaluation, and thus (if needed) to epistemic improvement. Beliefs can be true or false, epistemically justified, probable or improbable.<sup>11</sup> Concepts can be accurate, or – if they aim to designate one aspect of a complex phenomenon to make it tractable – useful. Values too, at least if they track mind-independent goods, can be accurate or inaccurate; they can also be epistemically revealing or concealing, depending on which matters they prompt us to look

into or ignore. I will use the term *accurate* to describe a belief system whose beliefs, concepts, and values are epistemically good (or useful) in these ways.<sup>12</sup> We can understand the plural-discourse claim as saying that foundational-worldview disagreement can improve the accuracy of belief systems on matters of public policy.

But what does accuracy with respect to public policy amount to? Very roughly, an accurate public-policy belief system is one that reflects a public policy that would meet the needs of people in the society across a plurality of social locations, such as income groups, ethnicities, religious or secular groupings, genders, and so forth. That is, it contains largely true *beliefs* – about what these needs are, which ends to pursue in order to meet them, and which means are best suited in the circumstances to achieving those ends (taking into account any disvalue incurred by the means themselves); and it contains *concepts* suitable for articulating those needs, ends, and means; as well as *values* that prioritize them. Given the manifold needs in a pluralistic society, there typically will not be a single optimal public-policy outcome, but rather several equally good possible outcomes. We may call the search for the best policy the search for *an optimal outcome*. Figuring out an optimal outcome is what I'll call the *epistemic aim of public-policy reasoning*.

There are three things that are subject to disagreement in this context. The first and most straightforward (because at least partly subject to empirical study) is which means are best for achieving certain ends. Second, there is the matter of disagreeing over which *ends themselves* to prioritize for the sake of meeting a plurality of needs; this question is less straightforward because of the role of values in determining the answer. Third, disagreement will concern what various segments of the population need to begin with. This too is not always a straightforward matter; a noteworthy feature of some religious belief systems is that they contain beliefs about what various segments of the population need that differ from what those parties take themselves to need. For example, a religious belief system might hold that people need to be saved from sinking too low into debauchery as the religious community construes it, whereas the people themselves might disagree about which behaviours constitute debauchery, or they might agree but think that they need the freedom to sink into it if they choose.<sup>13</sup>

With this background on belief systems (including on public policy), I'll argue that disagreement in general can yield epistemic benefits. I'll then respond to objections to the effect that foundational-worldview disagreement, including about public policy, is an exception.

## **The Epistemic Benefits of Disagreement in General**

This section argues that disagreement is epistemically beneficial, including when it pertains to emotive matters like religion and public policy. It starts by defending the benefits of disagreement in general, then zeroes in on some distinguishing features of disagreement about emotive matters like religion and public policy.<sup>14</sup>

### *What Shapes Belief Systems*

My argument for the plural-discourse claim is premised on a picture of what influences our belief systems. I will discuss three salient factors. The first is *evidence*, which (as I understand it) consists in a person's representational experiences and her justified beliefs.<sup>15</sup> Evidence is a causal but also a normative influence on her beliefs. It can help build her concept of a thing, and it influences what she values and disvalues.

Second are *psychological influences*. These include affective states, which generate affective biases (e.g., fear of spiders generates a bias against spiders, a feeling of belonging generates a bias toward in-group members); and cognitive states, which generate cognitive or intellectual biases (e.g., we prefer our own data and experiences over other people's).<sup>16</sup>

Finally, *social influences* include the stereotypes and biases that are prevalent in our community or society – say, in the media or the going forms of humour, as well as interpersonal pressures to believe in accord with our friends or co-workers.<sup>17</sup>

Psychological and social factors can influence a person's reasoning directly, just by causing beliefs, concepts, or values. They also do so indirectly, operating through her experiential evidence. They influence, first, what she attends to or ignores;<sup>18</sup> and second, how she perceives things when she does attend to them – for example, because she loves her brother, she may perceive people who resemble him *as* kind.<sup>19</sup> Third, these factors influence how a person evaluates evidence: for example, whether she draws the simple but limited conclusion or the complex but explanatorily broad one, whether she believes or disbelieves a given person's testimony, and so forth.<sup>20</sup>

Each influence on our reasoning can promote or impede accuracy. Evidence for its part is supposed to promote true beliefs. In many cases it does – but whether it does depends on whether the psychological and social factors that influence your evidence and evidence-evaluation are themselves sensitive to the truth in the case at hand.

Many such factors are not truth-sensitive.<sup>21</sup> Some are sensitive to other concerns, such as prolonging our survival. For example, we might be strongly biased to believe, of any snake, that it is poisonous, even if this is statistically highly unlikely. For another example, a tendency to believe the testimony of in-group members and disbelieve outsiders may once have been a similar, exaggerated, safety mechanism, even if it is today largely outdated. Even many so-called “epistemic values”, such as a preference for simplicity over explanatory breadth, are not truth-sensitive as such, but are rather a priori preferences.<sup>22</sup>

That said, other influences on our belief systems are truth-sensitive; experts, for example, develop perceptual sensitivities from years of training. But even if an influence is truth-sensitive, it is highly unlikely to be *perfectly* responsive to the way things are. Experts can even commit certain errors *because of* their expertise. A dietician may be biased toward nutritional explanations, whereas cardiologists may favour cardiological ones. So even truth-sensitive influences are prone to yielding certain sorts of false belief. I call a false belief brought about by an otherwise truth-sensitive influence a *false-positive belief*.<sup>23</sup>

A salient social influence is the tendency of group members to engage in *groupthink*: to conform their reasoning to the thought patterns of their whole group.<sup>24</sup> Groupthink is not truth-sensitive as such, though if the group's thought is truth-sensitive, it can be. But even then, groupthink can cause false-positive beliefs. Imagine for example that France reports a comparatively large proportion of gout sufferers, whereas Germany reports statistically excessive hypothyroidism – yet other indicators would predict similar proportions of each. Groupthink in the medical professions of the respective countries might be the culprit.

The three influences on our beliefs (i.e., evidence, psychological factors, and social ones) are often *implicit*, occurring below our fully conscious awareness.<sup>25</sup> This can hold even of evidence: although this is understood to be available on sufficient reflection,<sup>26</sup> there are many

questions for which we have too much evidence to reflect on all at once, and there are many questions for which we never try.<sup>27</sup> This means that we are often unaware of what causes or justifies our beliefs, concepts, and values. Many of the influences in question may not be truth-sensitive, whereas others may be truth-sensitive but nonetheless prone to generating false-positive beliefs.

### *Two Epistemic Worries Mitigated by Foundational-Worldview Disagreement*

The considerations just discussed yield three epistemic concerns, including but not limited to matters of public policy, for those with limited exposure outside of their epistemic community.<sup>28</sup>

According to the *circularity worry*, a group of like-minded people conversing only with each other is badly placed to epistemically evaluate its own belief system:<sup>29</sup> members will be strongly disposed to give it a thumbs-up regardless. One reason is that they will carry out any such evaluation by the standards of their own belief system, which will be biased to self-favour. Another is that groupthink tendencies ensure that most individual group members exhibit the same thought patterns, and so will be ill-equipped to offer independent criticism.

The *distortion worry* says that a group's belief system is prone to misrepresent some aspects of reality. First, truth-insensitive influences are apt to be in place. Second, even truth-sensitive influences are likely to generate certain false-positive beliefs. Third, the circularity just observed hinders group members from seeing these distortions.

Foundational-worldview disagreement can help mitigate these worries, in three ways.<sup>30</sup> First, it can *provide constructive external criticism of your belief system*. A disagreeing outsider is well placed to notice implicit or unexamined foundational beliefs, concepts that miss important aspects of a phenomenon, or values that your belief system ignores. This helps mitigate the circularity worry, because it can alert us to aspects of our belief system that we took for granted and thus failed to evaluate, and it can provide a less sympathetic evaluation with which to triangulate our self-assessments. Of course, we will filter external criticism through our own beliefs, concepts, and values, but we will at least have more diverse data to run through the filter. As for the distortion worry, external criticism can provide clues about what our belief system may have missed or misconstrued, and in prompting us to nuance our belief systems it can rein in truth-insensitive biases and the false-positive effects of truth-sensitive biases. Importantly, your interlocutor need not be in better epistemic shape than you in order for his constructive criticism to benefit you in these ways; he need only notice weaknesses in your belief system or its influences.

Second, engaging in foundational-worldview disagreement can *expand your evidential basis*. It delivers evidence *that* someone disagrees with you, but more importantly, when you discourse at greater length, it informs you of the particular evidence supporting your interlocutor's belief system. That evidence will tend to differ from yours in two respects: First, it will arise from different types of event than the ones that you have experienced (since your interlocutors will tend to travel in different social and cultural circles than you); and second, your interlocutor's psychological and social influences will prime him to experience even similar events differently to you. The additional evidence provided by disagreement can help mitigate the circularity worry, for outsiders' evidence can be harder for our belief system to accommodate than our own evidence, and so can challenge positive epistemic self-evaluations. It can mitigate the distortion worry by supplementing our own evidence, which may be misleading because incomplete.

Third, engaging in foundational-worldview disagreement will *provide epistemic alternatives*: It can help you understand your interlocutors' beliefs, concepts, and values, and it will acquaint you with their evidence and reasoning. It will thus open possibilities for how things could be different than your belief system represents them. This may be an antidote to your community's groupthink, which narrows your space of possibilities. The provision of epistemic alternatives can mitigate the circularity worry, since alternatives can present other means of evaluation on which our own belief systems perform less well than on our own. And it can mitigate the distortion worry, since new epistemic alternatives can provide another way of reasoning that might complement, or be more fruitful than, the one that we have thus far been implementing by default.

These three epistemic benefits – external criticism, additional evidence, and epistemic alternatives – are especially important in discussions of public policy. Recall that the epistemic aim of public-policy reasoning is to figure out an optimal outcome for meeting the needs of people across a plurality of social locations, which of course includes locations other than one's own religious community. It is to be expected that the needs arising from one social location may be hard to recognize or understand from within others. In figuring out the right public policy for your society, then, it is crucial to seek external criticism of your public-policy belief system, additional evidence drawn from the experiences and views of people in other social locations, and epistemic alternatives that might be occluded from your own social location, especially as these concern the public-policy needs of those very people.<sup>31</sup>

#### *A Third Epistemic Worry Mitigated by Foundational-Worldview Disagreement*

The circularity and distortion worries arise for our reasoning generally. But there is a third worry arising specifically for reasoning about existentially and personally important matters – including religion, public policy, and the application of the one to the other. The *exacerbation worry*, as I call it, says that, when we are reasoning about such topics, the circularity and distortion worries are worsened: We become *less* adept at evaluating our own belief systems negatively, and they are *more* susceptible to distortion.

The reason is that thinking about such matters activates our psychological and community defences.<sup>32</sup> Public policy tends to be of great practical relevance, and our foundational worldview creates an overall coherent picture of life and our place in it. We tend to feel frightened at the prospect of our belief systems on these matters being called into question. On top of this, we tend to identify with our religious (or secular) and political groups, and one way of signalling and policing belonging is by ensuring that one espouses the community belief system. When it comes to these matters, then, the social and psychological influences described above activate more strongly to protect our belief systems as they stand.<sup>33</sup>

To see how, we need a brief glance at a key mechanism that gives rise to exacerbation. This mechanism is bias. A bias can be understood as a strong tendency to associate the object of your bias with some other object, concept, or emotion. A bias against alternative worldviews or public-policy belief systems manifests itself as a strong negative association with anything that represents that alternative to you, including the people who hold it. You perceive these things or people under a negative aspect, perhaps accompanied by negative emotions. This mode of perception in turn confirms and strengthens the bias itself, making you more apt next time round to have an even stronger negative perception or reaction when you consider alternative viewpoints or the people who hold them.<sup>34</sup>

I have said that foundational-worldview disagreement can mitigate the exacerbation worry. But this might appear to be exactly wrong: If we are primed for bias against things in seeming conflict with our own belief system, then surely a direct encounter with someone who disagrees with it will *trigger* our defensive biases and bring on exacerbation full throttle.

We may agree that this is a danger in certain cases – but in others less so. What makes the difference? To answer this question, consider what it takes for a bias to be undone: The person who harbours it must come across enough *counterinstances*, i.e., things or persons who do not conform to it. In the case of foundational-worldview disagreement, a counterinstance would be an interlocutor who does *not* pose a threat to what she deeply believes and holds dear. What sorts of interlocutors are these? I suggest that an interlocutor who can act as a counterinstance to an exacerbating bias is one who *respects* a person when engaging in disagreement with her. That is, he treats her as valuable in accord with her status *as a person*, a Kantian end in herself.<sup>35</sup> Respect, when manifested in foundational-worldview disagreements about public policy (or other sensitive matters), can help mitigate the exacerbation worry.<sup>36</sup>

How does respect do this? Being (and feeling) respected can put interlocutors at their ease. Treating someone respectfully signals that you are on his side and willing to take him seriously. This influences his negative biases to weaken against you, mitigating the exacerbation worry insofar as this is caused by biases against perceived threats to his foundational worldview and public-policy beliefs.

Mutual respect, then, helps foundational-worldview disagreement about public policy yield epistemic benefits. One way in which it does so is by making it easier for your interlocutor to respect you in turn, which will help you combat your biases against her. And mutual respect influences each interlocutor's perception and interpretation of the other *to be more accurate*. How? If your bias de-escalates, you will be less apt to perceive and interpret your interlocutor through its distorting lens; this will make room to perceive and interpret her as she is, in all her realistic nuance. This will put you in a better position to gain the epistemic benefits that disagreement with her can make available.

This includes engaging constructively with and learning from each other specifically on matters of public policy. The improved perception and interpretation made possible by respect will help each party better understand the other's public-policy needs and values. Supposing that your interlocutor's public-policy beliefs are reasonable from the standpoint of her needs and values, you will be in a better position to see for yourself how this is so.<sup>37</sup> The better the interlocutors understand each other's needs and values, the better a position each party will be in to think creatively with the other about the best public policy for their shared society.

In summary, engaging in disagreement in general has the potential to mitigate the circularity and distortion worries, by providing external criticism of your belief system, expanding your evidential basis, and providing epistemic alternatives. And engaging specifically in foundational-worldview disagreement about public policy – assuming the parties are respectful – has the potential to mitigate the exacerbation worry, by enhancing the accuracy of each party's perception and interpretation of the other.

### **The Objection from True Foundational-Worldview Beliefs**



Politically active religious communities might grant that the plural-discourse claim applies sometimes. But they may deny that it applies to themselves or to anyone else reasoning from *their* foundational worldview. For the beliefs contained in their foundational worldview, they will say, are true on the whole; all one need do is figure out their public-policy consequences. Moreover, people who do not subscribe to their foundational worldview are missing something crucial; so insofar as their public-policy opinions diverge from those of the community's in question, these opinions will likely just mislead or confuse. As for information about the public-policy needs of people belonging to other social locations, this can be had by asking them. Nothing as involving as *disagreement* about how to translate these needs into public-policy ends, or about the means for achieving these ends, is needed.

One response is to question whether a religious community can so easily identify its foundational-worldview beliefs to begin with in a way that is specific enough for them to serve as premises for public-policy reasoning as the objector envisions. For worldview beliefs (like any beliefs) come hand in hand with auxiliary beliefs and concepts, not least, for example, about the interpretation of scripture and tradition; as well as values. To the extent that the community's foundational worldview itself remains up for grabs, it cannot provide a determinate bedrock from which to reason about public policy.

But even supposing that a maximally specific interpretation can be found, an important problem looms: *Foundational-worldview beliefs significantly underdetermine public policy*. In other words, there are multiple public-policy positions that are compatible with any given set of such beliefs. The reason is simply that foundational-worldview beliefs, concepts, and values are silent on many matters of relevance to public policy.<sup>38</sup> The adherents of the foundational worldview must supplement their worldview belief system with a *public-policy* belief system: a set of beliefs, concepts, and values concerning public policy itself, which concern matters that extend beyond a foundational worldview.

Start with beliefs. We need empirical beliefs about cause and effect, e.g., whether a three-strikes policy will reduce crime rates. We need theoretical beliefs about explanatory principles, e.g., whether, in explaining a social phenomenon like poverty, simple explanations that focus on individual actors are better than complex ones that also bring in social, economic and historical factors. We need beliefs about how a given phenomenon is best measured statistically, about which corollary effects a given policy will have, and so forth. Matters such as these are not determined by foundational-worldview belief systems, no matter how specific the latter are.

A similar point holds for *concepts*. There are manifold concepts that are relevant to public policy yet that play no role in foundational worldviews. Concepts are relevant to our descriptions of ends and means. Take for example the concept of unemployment.<sup>39</sup> One might define an unemployed person as one who is not engaging in full-time paid work and is actively seeking such work; the idea would be to isolate a category that exerts downward pressure on wage rates.<sup>40</sup> But this concept – once regarded as standard – ignores people who are not in full-time paid work and who (say because of discouragement) have given up the search; it thus ignores other important phenomena related to joblessness, such as divorce rates, mental illness, and so forth. Concepts can also affect the *value* that we assign to the public-policy means and ends under discussion. For example, whether we conceptualize prostitution as immorality, victimhood, or entrepreneurship affects whether we value policies for jailing, rehabilitating, or taxing prostitutes. And whether we conceptualize social welfare as a human right as opposed to a kind of charity<sup>41</sup> may affect how we value a policy of leaving its provision to individuals or mandating its provision by the state. Yet not even a

highly specific worldview belief system can determine a preference between one or another of these and other concepts.

Finally, there are *values* of relevance to public policy. Should we value an outcome in which abortion is illegal, even if it is also one in which an industry of dangerous backstreet abortions thrives? Should we value the provision of jobs and the boosting of the oil economy (and the enhancements in economic wellbeing that this may bring about) over the religious freedom of First Nations whose sacred land would thereby be violated? There are many public-policy related values that a specific worldview belief system will leave underdetermined: One could argue in different ways from it.

The need for a public-policy belief system in addition to the foundational worldview is a problem for the member of the politically active religious community I have in mind. To see why, recall her motivation in suppressing foundational-worldview disagreement to begin with: She takes her foundational-worldview beliefs to be true, and her concepts, and values accurate or fitted to purpose; she thus regards those which are incompatible with hers as false, inaccurate, and unfit to purposes. But since her religious beliefs, concepts and values do not suffice to determine public-policy positions, she will have to supplement them with beliefs, concepts, and values that cannot remotely be argued to follow from their worldview beliefs. Moreover, she will need to do more than simply figure out which public-policy belief system is compatible with her worldview-belief system, for there will be multiple compatible ones to choose from. So *even if* her worldview beliefs are true (and her concepts apt, and her values maximally specified), the advantages that this brings fall short of what is needed to guarantee an optimal public policy in the circumstances. This means that the adherents of foundational worldviews, even if largely true, are stuck reasoning about public-policy matters from considerations that might be false, just like anyone else.

But if this is so, then the accuracy of one's foundational worldview provides no reason to eschew open discussion about public-policy matters. On the contrary: *Pace* the objector, my arguments from section 3 apply here. In order to avoid the perils of circularity and distortion, which are exacerbated in our thinking about public policy and foundational worldviews, even the adherent of true foundational-worldview beliefs should engage in disagreement over public policy with people from differing religious and secular traditions. Disagreeing interlocutors can offer constructive criticism of the worldview adherents' reasoning about public policy; they can offer additional evidence about public policy; and they can provide alternative viewpoints and patterns of reasoning on public policy. They can also – in the context of a relationship of mutual respect – offer counterexamples that help de-fuse one's biases against things that strike one as incompatible with one's foundational worldview. Moreover, none of this requires *changing* the community's foundational worldview.

The objector might still resist my conclusion. She may argue that, instead of engaging in foundational-worldview disagreement, her community should simply draw on its own public-policy experts. They will see the world through the perspective of the right foundational worldview, *and* they will know how to apply it; disagreement with outsiders is not needed after all. In response, securing the opinions of community experts is surely epistemically advisable; it is also important for the sake of being true to one's values. But it is still advisable, on top of this, to solicit the opinions of outside experts. For even though community experts will know about the public-policy matters on which their opinions are needed, they will be susceptible to groupthink effects arising with fellow community members. Some of this groupthink might be truth-sensitive, but, since the worldview beliefs themselves underdetermine public-policy thinking, there is little reason to expect it to be

truth-sensitive *on public policy*. And to the extent that it is, false-positive beliefs will still creep in. It is thus epistemically better to call on experts from all manner of religious and secular traditions to engage in foundational-worldview disagreement with each other.

Finally, a response to the paternalism in the attitude of the politically active religious community I have in mind. This paternalism takes two forms. The first arises in the idea that a religious policymaker need not engage in public-policy disagreement with occupants of various social locations, but can simply ask them what their needs are. The idea would be that she would determine, herself, which ends must be achieved in order to meet those needs, and which means are best suited to achieving those ends. In response, it should be clear by now that this suggestion, even apart from its problematic paternalism, is unworkable. I have argued that a foundational-worldview belief system is insufficient to achieve the epistemic aim of public-policy reasoning; *a fortiori*, it is all the less sufficient to achieve this aim on the highly specialized matter of meeting the needs of a socially situated group to which one does not belong. Surely members of that group should be included among the parties to the debate.<sup>42</sup>

The second form of paternalism goes a level deeper; it involves thinking that you know better than another group what their needs are to begin with – and that *this* is why engaging in disagreement with them will not help you legislate for them. My argument thus far furnishes two responses to this attitude. First, the circularity, distortion, and exacerbation worries give serious cause to doubt that we are often in a position to judge what others' needs are better than they themselves.

Second, however, we cannot exclude the possibility that one can sometimes – though rarely – be in such a position, for human flourishing has an objective component that other people may be in a better position to gauge than oneself. For example, it is possible to know better than a drug addict, whose judgment is sadly clouded, what is good for him (namely, not getting his fix). But even in rare cases like this, there is no reason to discount the views of others – such as addicts – in legislating how best to help them. On the contrary: There is positive reason to engage his disagreement about the matter. For the addict himself offers a unique viewpoint on how he (and those like him) wind up addicted, and on what factors would help him (and others) overcome their addictions.

The addict example does not involve foundational-worldview disagreement. But consider an example that does, involving the abortion debate. To oversimplify, imagine that a secular community argues on secular grounds that abortion does not amount to murder, whereas a religious community argues on religious grounds that it does. Suppose for the sake of the example that the religious group happens to be correct about this. If this is so, it is also reasonable to argue that abortion should strongly be discouraged – because of the intrinsic human value of the foetus, and because it is an act of mercy to strongly discourage someone from bringing guilt upon herself. However, even if all this is true, *it delivers more reason, not less*, to engage in disagreement with those who argue for secular reasons that abortion does not amount to murder. Supposing that the latter cannot be convinced, the next-best option is to hear them out on what they dislike about the religious group's public-policy recommendations, and on what they would recommend instead that would discourage people from having abortions. Ideas for the sake of illustration include various forms of practical, financial, social, legal, and psychological support for women who find themselves in difficult situations with unwanted pregnancies, to ensure that alternative options are at least as easy as an abortion itself would be. The best way to acquire such ideas, however, is to engage in disagreement, in this case foundational-worldview disagreement, about how to discourage abortion.

In summary, one cannot derive public policy from a worldview belief system alone – one must supplement it with a belief system about public policy, and this is best done by engaging in, or having community experts engage in, foundational-worldview disagreement about public policy. This also applies in cases in which politically active religious policymakers might naturally tend to paternalistically discourage disagreement instead.

### **The Objection from Properly Functioning Religious-Cognitive Faculties**

The representative of the politically active religious community may have another objection. His community's cognition, he will say, is powered by divine inspiration, and this ensures that the community's internal discussion of public policy will yield true beliefs on this matter, as well as concepts and values that are fit to purpose.

We cannot discuss all accounts of divine cognitive inspiration, so I will limit myself to the influential "sensus divinitatis" account developed by Alvin Plantinga.<sup>43</sup> The *sensus divinitatis* is a cognitive faculty; it resembles a mechanism of sense perception in that it uptakes information from the person's environment. But instead of yielding sensory experiences, it yields experiences of God's traces in the world, including accurate intellectual seemings concerning religious matters,<sup>44</sup> so that beliefs based on them are apt to be true. Plantinga says that, due to the noetic effects of sin, everyone comes into the world with a malfunctioning *sensus divinitatis*,<sup>45</sup> rendering it epistemically unreliable. But he adds that the Holy Spirit repairs the *sensus divinitatis* of certain people, who are then equipped to perceive religious aspects of reality and on that basis form true religious beliefs.<sup>46</sup> We may understand the objection, then, as the claim that each member of the objector's community has a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*; this means, says the objector, that the community's public-policy reasoning is apt to be reliable as it stands – so engaging in foundational-worldview disagreement is otiose at best.

This move, however, cannot vindicate politically active religious communities in suppressing foundational-worldview disagreement about public policy. For on any reasonable construal of the *sensus divinitatis*, this faculty does *not* help believers reason well about public policy in general. Its remit is to enable them to perceive *religious* aspects of reality, and as we saw in section 4, any insights that one might have into religious reality drastically underdetermine public policy.<sup>47</sup>

But even though a *sensus divinitatis* does not help believers reason well about public policy in general, it can help them in one sort of situation: *when they are engaging in foundational-worldview disagreement about it*. In other words, if there is such a thing as a *sensus divinitatis*, this faculty could *help* its possessors use foundational-worldview disagreement about public policy as an epistemic tool. But for this to happen, they would have to engage in such disagreement after all, vindicating the plural-discourse claim.

My argument can be summarized like this: We saw that a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*, if there is such a thing, helps a person perceive religious aspects of reality. This means that, if engaging with a disagreeing interlocutor about public policy has any religious dimensions, the person with a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis* will be in a good place to cognize them. I claim that, supposing that there is a religious reality, foundational-worldview disagreement about public policy does have religious dimensions – and that perceiving them can yield insight about public policy.

To see the religious dimension of foundational-worldview disagreement, note that a disagreeing interlocutor is a person, and personhood is a religiously significant aspect of reality. Think of Jesus saying in Matthew's Gospel that what you have done unto the least of these people, you have done unto him.<sup>48</sup> Think also of Mother Teresa who, in her posthumously published letters, reveals that she felt Christ's presence the most strongly in the people to whom she was ministering.<sup>49</sup> It is a common religious idea that God made human beings in his image. So supposing that this sort of religious worldview is accurate (as the objector presumably takes it to be), personhood has a sacred value that is of a piece with the value of God himself. And if this is so, a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis* can help you perceive this sacred value in persons – that is, to see persons *as* valuable, indeed sacred.

So there is a religious dimension to foundational-worldview disagreement. Can perceiving it yield insights about public policy? I propose that it can. To see how, recall from the subsection “A third epistemic worry mitigated by foundational-worldview disagreement” that foundational-worldview disagreement must, if the exacerbation worry is to be overcome, be carried out with mutual respect. I suggest that a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*, supposing that there is such a thing, can help cultivate respect. After all, it helps you perceive your interlocutors as made in the image of God and hence deserving of infinite respect; this can surely motivate you to respond *by* respecting them.<sup>50</sup> So a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*, far from making foundational-worldview disagreement about public policy unnecessary, can promote the respect that helps this sort of disagreement secure the epistemic benefits on matters of public policy.

## Conclusion

I have argued that foundational-worldview disagreement over public policy has the strong potential to be epistemically beneficial. Discursing over public policy with adherents of other religious or secular belief systems can combat the psychological and social pressures, including groupthink effects, that make us prone to seeing the world through the limited lens of those who think as we do. As such it is a powerful tool for obtaining constructive criticism, gaining new evidence, and seeing new epistemic alternatives. And combined with mutual respect, foundational-worldview disagreement can also help overcome epistemically detrimental biases that would otherwise attach to interlocutors who disagree with us about sensitive matters like religion and public policy.

My argument delivers a strong epistemological reason to reject the position of the politically active religious community whose aim is to suppress public-policy discussion with those outside of its narrow sphere. Recall that this community is motivated in part by the epistemic concern of ensuring that the public-policy insights of their own religious worldview not be diluted by “worldly” considerations. I have argued, on the contrary, that true religious beliefs are not guaranteed to deliver good public policy, since public policy concerns matters that stretch far beyond the religious domain. I have also argued that the appeal to divine cognitive aid speaks *for* engaging in foundational-worldview disagreement over public policy, not against it.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Prov. 24:6.

<sup>2</sup> This approach can arguably be found in the work of Cornelius van Til, who argues (after the fashion of the Dutch Calvinists) that all of a Christian's thinking, including about matters other than religion itself, should be completely under divine authority since human reasoning on its own is totally depraved; cf. Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1969). Along similar lines, Harry Blamires writes: The "religious view of life" is "the view which sets all earthly issues within the context of the eternal, the view which relates all human problems – social, political, cultural – to the doctrinal foundations of the Christian Faith"; Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?* (London: S. P. C. K., 1963), 4.

<sup>3</sup> See also Jonkers, "How to break the Ill-Fated Bond between Religious Truth and Violence?" in this volume.

<sup>4</sup> Helen Longino, *The Fate of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Helen De Cruz and Johan De Smedt, "The value of epistemic disagreement in scientific practice. The case of *Homo floresiensis*," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science, Part A*, 44, no. 2 (2013).

<sup>5</sup> José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> See the contributions to this volume of Grube and Jonkers, respectively: "Respecting Religious Otherness as Otherness versus Exclusivism and Pluralism" and "How to break the Ill-Fated Bond between Religious Truth and Violence?"

<sup>7</sup> This notion of disagreement is similar to what Jonkers, in "How to break the Ill-Fated Bond," this volume, has in mind. Disagreement as I understand it can be construed, as Jonkers puts it, in terms of creating a "shared space" in which interlocutors can think from within their own frameworks and try to recognize the internal reasonableness of each other's frameworks, rather than a "neutral space" in which interlocutors are expected to employ only considerations that are germane to others too.

<sup>8</sup> We need criteria for which belief systems are epistemically beyond the pale; I cannot address this here. For further discussion of engaging in disagreement with beyond-the-pale belief systems, see Katherine Dormandy, "Disagreement from the Religious Margins," *Res Philosophica* 95 (2018), 389-390.

<sup>9</sup> Cottingham, in "The Epistemic Implications of Religious Diversity," this volume, similarly emphasizes the complex and interlocking nature in particular of our religious worldview.

<sup>10</sup> The following account of belief systems and what influences them draws heavily from Katherine Dormandy, "The Epistemic Benefits of Religious Disagreement," *Religious Studies*, forthcoming, which in turn draws on Elizabeth Anderson, "Knowledge, Human Interests, and Objectivity in Feminist Epistemology," *Philosophical Topics* 23, no. 2 (1995).

<sup>11</sup> Wiertz, in "Epistemic Desiderata and Religious Plurality," this volume, provides a comprehensive discussion of these and other epistemic desiderata. Grube, this volume, rejects bivalent truth and falsehood for *religious* beliefs ("Respecting Religious Otherness as Otherness versus Exclusivism and Pluralism"), whereas I assume bivalent truth for beliefs about religion and public policy alike, as well as a realist and cognitivist view of truth, in sympathy with the contributions of Wahlberg ("Truth, Meaning and Interreligious Understanding") and Wiertz.

<sup>12</sup> Wiertz, in "Epistemic Desiderata and Religious Plurality," (this volume), discusses additional epistemic desiderata for evaluating belief systems as a whole.

<sup>13</sup> I am assuming that there are mind-independent truths about people's needs, even if people themselves play a role in determining what those truths are.

<sup>14</sup> I draw the general aspects of the argument from Dormandy, "Epistemic Benefits."

<sup>15</sup> Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, *Evidentialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). See also Wiertz, "Epistemic Desiderata and Religious Plurality," this volume, for a more detailed discussion of evidence.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011); Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons, *The Invisible Gorilla and Other Ways Our Intuition Deceives Us* (New York: Crown, 2011); Miriam Solomon, *Social Empiricism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> Irving Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1982).

<sup>18</sup> Chabris and Simons, *Groupthink*, chap. 1; Arien Mack and Irvin Rock, *Inattentional Blindness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).

<sup>19</sup> Petra Vetter and Albert Newen, "Varieties of Cognitive Penetration in Visual Perception," *Consciousness and Cognition* 27 (2014); John Zeimbekis and Athanassios Raftopoulos, *The Cognitive Penetrability of Perception: New Philosophical Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> Kahneman, *Thinking*, pts. II and III; Chabris and Simons, *Groupthink*, chap. 5.

<sup>21</sup> See Wiertz, "Epistemic Desiderata and Religious Plurality," this volume, for more on the reliability of belief-forming processes.

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- <sup>22</sup> Solomon, *Social Empiricism*; Antony, “Reflections.”
- <sup>23</sup> Katherine Dormandy, “Resolving Religious Disagreements,” *Faith and Philosophy* 35 (2018), 60.
- <sup>24</sup> Janis, *Groupthink*.
- <sup>25</sup> See e.g. the contributions to Michael Brownstein and Jennifer Saul, eds., *Implicit Bias and Philosophy*, Volume I: Metaphysics and Epistemology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- <sup>26</sup> Conee and Feldman, *Evidentialism*.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>28</sup> Dormandy, “Epistemic Benefits.”
- <sup>29</sup> I will not distinguish explicitly between the belief system of a group member and that of the group itself. I will assume that these are similar and that they influence each other, though the group belief system influences each individual more than each individual influences the group.
- <sup>30</sup> Wiertz, “Epistemic Desiderata and Religious Plurality,” this volume, makes a similar argument, to the effect that engaging with adherents of other religious belief systems can help a person understand her own.
- <sup>31</sup> If my argument for the epistemic benefits of foundational-worldview disagreement *for those with true religious beliefs* is on target, then Grube’s claim (this volume, “Respecting Religious Otherness as Otherness versus Exclusivism and Pluralism”) that exclusivists have no reason to discourse with the religious Other has been shown to be overhasty.
- <sup>32</sup> Jonkers, in “How to break the Ill-Fated Bond between Religious Truth and Violence?” in this volume, discusses the emotive potential of religious worldviews and the implications thereof.
- <sup>33</sup> Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg and Tom Pyszczynski, “A Terror Management Theory of Social Behavior: The Psychological Functions of Self-Esteem and Cultural Worldviews,” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 24 (1991).
- <sup>34</sup> For discussion of biases and their epistemological implications, see the contributions to Michael Brownstein and Jennifer Saul, eds., *Implicit Bias and Philosophy*.
- <sup>35</sup> Stephen Darwall calls this *recognition respect* and distinguishes it from *appraisal respect*, which is what you accord someone in proportion to her character or competencies; Stephen Darwall, “Two Kinds of Respect,” in *Dignity, Character, and Self-Respect*, ed. Robin S. Dillon (New York: Routledge, 1995).
- <sup>36</sup> See Grube, this volume, “Respecting Religious Otherness as Otherness versus Exclusivism and Pluralism,” for a discussion of respect for the religious Other.
- <sup>37</sup> I am supposing that seeing someone as reasonable is compatible with disagreeing with her; for discussion see Richard Feldman, “Reasonable Religious Disagreements,” in *Philosophers Without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular*, ed. Louise Antony (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- <sup>38</sup> I realize that the notion of religion is contentious and that the boundary between religious and non-religious subject matters is vague. Nonetheless, all I need for present purposes is the fairly uncontroversial claim that there is such a boundary – and that many issues of relevance to public policy fall outside of the religious domain.
- <sup>39</sup> See Elizabeth Anderson, “Knowledge, Human Interests, and Objectivity in Feminist Epistemology,” *Philosophical Topics* 23, no. 2 (1995), 45–46.
- <sup>40</sup> This concept in fact doesn’t even effectively trace downward pressure on wage rates. The reason is that it ignores *part-time* workers seeking full-time work; cf. Anderson (*ibid.*).
- <sup>41</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, “The Role of Religion in Decision and Discussion of Political Issues,” in *Religion in the Public Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate*, eds. Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997).
- <sup>42</sup> Sandra Harding, *Objectivity and Diversity: Another Logic of Scientific Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).
- <sup>43</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). See also Wiertz, “Epistemic Desiderata and Religious Plurality,” this volume, for discussion.
- <sup>44</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted*, 172–174.
- <sup>45</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted*, 203, 212.
- <sup>46</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted*, 278.
- <sup>47</sup> I discuss the epistemic limitations of the *sensus divinitatis* at greater length in *Epistemic Benefits*.
- <sup>48</sup> Matt. 25:40.
- <sup>49</sup> Mother Teresa, *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta*, ed. Brian Kolodiejchuk (New York: Random House, 2007).
- <sup>50</sup> By no means is a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis* necessary for respecting others. It is just one of many means of seeing people as deserving of respect.
- <sup>51</sup> Many thanks to Oliver J. Wiertz and Peter Jonkers for valuable comments. Thanks for stimulating discussion go to the Templeton cluster on religious diversity at the Philosophisch-Theologische Hochschule St. Georgen and to an audience at the APA Central Division meeting in Chicago. I am grateful to the FWF (Austrian Science Fund) for funding this research.