

26 What do we do About Religious Disagreements?

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I. Introduction

Sarah and Emily are trying out a new restaurant for dinner. The restaurant was recommended by a friend who gave them directions. As Sarah and Emily walk downtown and reach the intersection of 8th and Pleasant, Sarah thinks they're supposed to go west on Pleasant, but Emily thinks they're supposed to go east. Fortunately, there's a few options to resolve their disagreement. They could call their friend to get clarification, they could ask a local, or they could look it up. Two texts later, they find out that Emily was right, so they go east on Pleasant and find the restaurant.

Disagreements like this are not uncommon. We have faulty memories, we misread things, we make snap judgments, or we misinterpret evidence. When we find ourselves in these situations, we can resolve our disagreements fairly easily. We can defer to an authoritative source to make sure our information is accurate; we can correct our errors in judgment or our faulty reasoning.

But not all disagreements are as easily managed. Sometimes we don't have access to all of the relevant information, and sometimes intelligent people disagree with us. While we can find a definitive answer to the question, "Is the restaurant east or west of 8th?", we don't necessarily find definitive answers to questions like, "Was Jesus simply a prophet, or was he the son of God?". We can't resolve disagreements about these questions by texting a friend or by identifying a failure of reasoning. The difficulty of these more significant disagreements lies in the fact that reasonable, intelligent people genuinely interested in finding the truth nonetheless find themselves in disagreement.

When we face religious disagreements of this kind, we face a challenge of rationality: what does reason require of us when we find ourselves in disagreement? There are three plausible options: (i) we can remain steadfast in our original belief, (ii) we can lower our confidence in our belief, or (iii) we can suspend judgment. In what follows in this chapter, we will sketch a model of religious disagreement that prompts us to choose among these options. Then we will address each option in turn. Ultimately, I will argue we should take option (ii), lowering confidence in our belief in the face of religious disagreement.

II. Is Religious Disagreement Peer Disagreement?

We're considering what rationality requires of us when we face religious disagreements. To be more precise, this question is most consequential when we face religious disagreements of a particular kind. Some religious disagreements arise because, like Sarah or Emily, someone made a mistake. If two

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people give different answers to the question, “Is lobster kosher?”, then one person is right and the other is wrong. This disagreement is resolved by identifying someone’s mistake, and rationality requires this person to revise their original judgment when the mistake comes to light.

Instead, we will restrict our discussion to disagreements that involve people who are comparably intelligent, have access to the same information, and are genuinely interested in finding the truth of the matter. Call such people *epistemic peers*. ‘Epistemic’ means ‘concerning knowledge or justification’. Epistemic peers are on a par with respect to their rational capacities. Challenges arise when epistemic peers disagree with each other, for it isn’t the case that someone made a mistake by disregarding relevant information or didn’t adequately assess relevant evidence. Instead, epistemic peers seem on equal footing with respect to the status of their beliefs.

For instance, consider debates about global climate change. There is some disagreement about how quickly temperatures will increase in the absence of substantial intervention. Many expect that we will see a 2°C increase above pre-industrial levels, but they disagree about how quickly this will happen. Will it happen by 2035? 2050? The end of the century? Well-educated people, highly competent and highly motivated to find an answer, face the same body of evidence and nonetheless provide different estimates. They are epistemic peers, but they arrive at different conclusions. This is an instance of peer disagreement.

In asking “Is religious disagreement peer disagreement?”, then, we wonder whether religious disagreement truly involves epistemic peers who examine the same body of evidence and arrive at different conclusions. If religious disagreement is *not* peer disagreement, then those who disagree must not be equally intelligent, must have access to different information, or must not be genuinely interested in finding the truth. But many religious scholars are indeed genuinely motivated to find the truth, they examine available evidence (historical context, holy texts, theological arguments, etc.), and they do so honestly. Yet they disagree. At the very least, we should be charitable to those who disagree with us until we have reason to think otherwise. Questions about, for example, God’s nature or paths to salvation prompt different answers from different religious traditions, and these matters are not readily resolved. Since it is not a matter of widespread dishonesty or widespread epistemic failures of entire traditions, it is most plausible to view intractable religious disagreements like this as instances of peer disagreement. And, as such, these disagreements drive us toward challenges of rationality.

III. What does Reason Require of Us?

Although some elements of religious belief are contingent on faith, many are bolstered by reason and are appropriately targets of rational critique. Rationality is both desirable and necessary for persisting in religious belief. Consider, for instance, when certain religious beliefs are charged as being “irrational.” Religious thinkers often respond to these charges with defenses of the rationality of the beliefs rather than dismissing the critique as irrelevant. When we examine our own religious beliefs, too, we should have an eye toward rationality.

Religious disagreement – as peer disagreement – then puts us in an awkward position. We hold beliefs, often after careful consideration of relevant information, and our beliefs are then challenged by a peer who disagrees. Logical space yields several options; the three we mentioned at the outset are viable. We can (i) remain steadfast in our original belief, (ii) lower our confidence in our belief, or (iii) suspend

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judgment on the matter. These options are more easily seen when we abstract away from religious contexts, so consider the following example:

You and a friend are taking the same math class. You both find it challenging but manageable, and you often work together to double check your homework assignments. Suppose you and your friend both work on an especially difficult problem. After careful calculation, you think the answer is -57. Your friend, after careful calculation, thinks the answer is 57. We will assume that both you and your friend have access to the same information, e.g., neither of you missed the class that covered this material, and you both are genuinely trying to find the right answer.

Let's now consider how each of the three options would play out once you're aware of this disagreement:

- (i) *Remain steadfast* in your original belief that the answer is -57. You might think back to your calculations and believe that you solved the problem correctly. You can acknowledge that your friend is an epistemic peer, but this doesn't negate the work that you did to solve the problem. Since you're fairly confident in your abilities to work through difficult problems, and you gave the problem your full attention and effort, you continue to believe that the answer is -57 despite the disagreement.
- (ii) *Lower your confidence* in your belief that the answer is -57. Again, you may believe that you solved the problem correctly, and you acknowledge that your friend is an epistemic peer. Now that you're aware that a peer came up with a different answer, you must factor this into your considerations. You may still persist in your belief, and if someone asked you what you think the answer is, you would say "-57." But you are not as confident as you would've been had you not learned about the disagreement.
- (iii) *Suspend judgment* about the answer. Acknowledging that an epistemic peer came up with a different answer provides strong reason to reconsider your answer. You can acknowledge that you did the calculations carefully, but your friend did the calculations carefully, too. Since people sometimes do calculations carefully and still make mistakes, you decide that you both need to re-check your work. You refrain from taking a particular stance on the problem once the disagreement arises.

Like Emily and Sarah's restaurant disagreement or disagreeing about whether lobster is kosher (according to Jewish religious texts, it clearly is not), the disagreement about the math problem is easily resolved. It's likely that you or your friend simply missed a negative sign somewhere in the calculations. But before anyone rechecks their work, these three options are on the table.

The same options arise in response to religious disagreement, although the stakes feel much higher and the resolution elusive. Consider a religious belief that you have (e.g., that God exists or that God does not exist). Then imagine (or remember) a peer who disagrees with you on this matter. When you find someone who is sincere, is intelligent, and evaluates the available evidence but disagrees with you, you face these three options. What should you do?

I suggest that reason requires you to take option (ii) and lower confidence in your belief. The existence

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of peer disagreement about religious matters reflects important features of these beliefs. Religious beliefs are simultaneously consequential and under-supported. They are consequential in that they shape our motivations, our practices, and our paradigms. They are under-supported in that definitive evidence that would unequivocally establish their truth is absent. The existence of peers who disagree with us becomes part of the body of evidence that we must consider. We must also weigh the fact that there are rational theists and atheists who are genuinely interested in finding the truth of the matter and nonetheless disagree.

Remaining steadfast, option (i), is therefore not consistent with rationality. Unlike the case of the math problem where you face just one peer who disagrees, religious disagreement is widespread and long-lasting. There is a history of disagreement even among the well-educated and well-intentioned. Ignoring this disagreement is ignoring relevant evidence, and ignoring relevant evidence is irrational.

Suspending judgment is not consistent with rationality because it requires weighing the disagreement *too* heavily. Since religious beliefs are often inextricably linked to personal practices and paradigms, option (iii) asks too much of you. The existence of peer disagreement is noteworthy, and it requires consideration, but rationality should not require an overhaul of your paradigms without very strong evidence against your previously-held beliefs. The existence of disagreement is evidence, but it is not *that* strong.

The appropriate response, the response that reason requires of us, is lowering confidence in our beliefs in the face of religious disagreement. We must acknowledge that disagreement constitutes evidence, but we need not abandon our beliefs entirely on this basis alone. Reason may also require us to reconsider our beliefs and search for new evidence, but we may continue in our beliefs as long as we do so more modestly.

IV. Objections

I've advocated for option (ii), but not everyone agrees with me. In fact, you may not agree with me, either. Someone might favor option (i), remaining steadfast, by appealing to evidence that is available only privately. Perhaps in addition to the evidence afforded by study of holy texts or religiously-oriented arguments you also have personal religious *experiences* that prompt you to hold certain beliefs. Maybe you believe that God exists in part because you've had experiences as of sensing the presence of God. Or maybe you believe that God does not exist because of an utter *lack* of any such sensation. This kind of evidence is uniquely available to you, and as such, any peers that disagree with you cannot factor this evidence into their considerations. In reply, I would note that peers that disagree with you may have personal religious experiences of their own that *you* cannot factor into consideration. The possibility of these experiences merely adds another layer of disagreement rather than vindicating your steadfastness. While personal religious experiences may count as evidence, they do not count as evidence that overrides the disagreement.

Or someone may argue in favor of option (iii), suspending judgment. Someone may object by granting that religious beliefs often shape our practices and our paradigms but arguing that we may retain these paradigms and practices in the absence of assenting to particular beliefs. If we truly face disagreement, they might argue, rationality requires us to suspend judgment until new evidence comes to light, but rationality does not require us to give up our social, familiar, or traditional practices. In reply, I grant

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that this may be possible, but I am skeptical that many of us would be comfortable with the cognitive dissonance that would likely result. Part of belonging to particular religious groups (or groups that intentionally disavow religious tradition) is experiencing the solidarity of having beliefs in common. Withholding judgment about them may require withholding oneself from full participation in practices or rituals that once held significance and meaning.

I maintain my suggestion that when we face religious disagreement, reason requires us to lower confidence in our beliefs, but we are not required to let them go entirely. I do not, however, take this brief discussion of objections and replies to be conclusive and instead offer paths toward continued discussion.

V. Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to present religious disagreement as a form of peer disagreement and to outline the viable options in response. Since religious thought is embodied by epistemic peers, people who are intelligent, are motivated to find the truth, and evaluate the same evidence, religious disagreement is therefore an instance of peer disagreement. In the face of peer disagreement, three options are plausible. We may remain steadfast in our belief, we may lower confidence in our belief, or we may suspend judgment. I argued in favor of the second option, since the existence of disagreement counts toward the overall evidence but is not strong enough to warrant abandoning the belief. So, what do we do about religious disagreements? We should lower confidence in our religious beliefs.

For Review and Discussion:

1. What are the origins of religious disagreement? What type of disagreements are they? Do you think they are different when they take place within a particular faith as opposed to between different faiths? Is this important?
2. How do you handle religious disagreements between yourself and others? Is this similar or different to what the author argues for?
3. In your opinion, what does rationality require of us in response to religious disagreement? Explain.