

Matthew A. Benton and Jonathan L. Kvanvig, eds.
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The epistemology of disagreement has been one of the most discussed topics in recent analytic epistemology. The results of this discussion have been applied early on to the religious context, and one of the issues has been the unique nature of religious disagreement, which sets it apart from other forms of peer disagreement. This collection of essays by leading epistemologists presents the state of the art of this discussion.

The volume starts with an introductory chapter, which helpfully explains the basic moves and ideas that have been employed in the general disagreement debate. Several essays focus specifically on the question of how religious disagreement might or might not differ from other forms of disagreement. Arguing for uniqueness in the religious sphere may be helpful if one wishes to confront the conciliationist solution to disagreement. In this case, because religious knowledge is somehow unique, there is no real peer disagreement since the evidence basis is different for each person and consequently all the parties in dispute may rationally retain their original beliefs.

There are several ways of arguing for the uniqueness of religious disagreement. One way is to maintain that religious believing is not merely doxastic, but it involves deeper beliefs and commitments of what kind of person I wish to become. Effectively, religious convictions are very broad so that they form the basis for the believer's cognitive framework. Giving up a religious conviction would likely result in a ripple effect that threatens a wider body of beliefs. In this case, the believer has a reason not to give in too easily in the face of disagreement. This is suggested by Joshua Blanchard, L.A. Paul, and Richard Feldman. Similarly, Laura Frances Callahan argues that understanding is a crucial aspect of getting religious identity right. Understanding typically involves the whole system of belief and it is less factive than knowledge. Understanding is also connected to the right kind of affects and actions. Thus, approaching religious believing from a strictly epistemic angle might not do justice to what religious identity consists of.

Margareta Greta Turnbull twists the discussion around and argues that religious disagreement is not unique because all the central and relevant features of religious believing can be found in other non-religious contexts as well. Like in many secular cases, we may find ourselves unable to communicate the private evidence adequately. If we allow this in secular cases, why not in religious cases?

A related concept here is religious experience. If a religious experience is existentially gripping and it has a strong sense of obviousness, it is subjectively very hard to see how it could be wrong. But are people's religious experiences really like that? Granted, some may have strong experiences, but if I would have to guess, many religious people have never experienced anything like that. Also, a strong internal sense of certainty may not last very long,

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being only momentary. If many religious experiences are mere fleeting and passing “seemings”, are they able to carry the epistemic weight in disagreement cases?

John Pittard discusses, among other things, this challenge in his essay, which argues for the rationality of resisting conciliation in religious disagreement cases. Pittard grants that believers may in some cases have access to partisan justification of their own beliefs in the face of disagreement. This, however, requires an internalist type of rationality and the ability to argue for the greater rational merits of one’s own outlook. According to Pittard, Reformed Epistemology does not offer a good option for non-consiliationist strategies with regard to religious disagreement.

Nathan King discusses the problem he calls “the apologists dilemma.” If the apologist thinks that she has knockdown arguments and it is not rational to reject them, she effectively regards her interlocutors as irrational, which may come across as impolite and disrespectful. But if she thinks that they are rational in rejecting her arguments so that there are several ways one can respond to the same body of evidence, she is in danger of undermining her own position. Moreover, in this case rational unbelief is possible but God (according to some views) condemns unbelievers to eternal punishment for their rational unbelief.

One can mitigate these conclusions, but there seems to be nothing on the cards that would make these problems disappear. The apologists must pay a price in one from or the other. It could be asked, however, how many people adopt or disregard worldviews or philosophies based on philosophical arguments in the first place? It takes years or even decades for highly trained professionals to understand theistic arguments and this is something that cannot be reasonably demanded from ordinary people. Many churchgoers and atheists are equally badly equipped to grasp their meaning. Belief formation is to a large extent subconscious and often beyond our voluntary control. This does not mean that arguments are of no value. The value of apologetics perhaps just isn’t as great as some apologists believe. Pittard, however, thinks that if we broaden the nature of religious evidence to include axiological, moral, and aesthetic insights, we might have reasons to believe that these are something that also non-professionals are capable of assessing and ordinary believers would have access to the justification of their beliefs this way.

Jonathan Kvanvig approaches this same issue from the viewpoint of the definition of faith, which builds upon his earlier work in *Faith and Humility* (2018). If we would think about faith more as an affective rather than as a cognitive state, or as a disposition towards an ideal, we could make sense of what it is than combines all the examples of faith from Genesis to our own times. Following this route, our definition of faith would have to downplay the cognitive aspects of faith. Kvanvig’s essay relates to the discussion concerning salvific inclusivism. By lowering the cognitive demands, also religious disagreement would be less of a problem.

While I believe Kvanvig’s attempt at broadening the definition of faith is a welcome one, it still seems somewhat underdeveloped. He realizes that lowering the cognitive bar brings him close to relativism, which he tries to resist. Moreover, it is also possible to disagree about dispositions and ideals, and it is also possible to use cognitive claims about the nature of dispositions and ideals. Getting rid of cognitivism seems to be a tall order.

Are not agnostics and atheists in the same epistemic boat with theists so that if they all disagree with each other, there is no available middle ground which could or should be accepted by all? Sanford C. Goldberg confronts this puzzle by arguing that agnostics and atheists are not in fact part of the same conversation as religious practitioners. The former group views the religious debate from the outside and infers from the persistent and widespread disagreement that this gives them good higher-order evidence for the thinking that there is no truth to be had with regard to religion. I find this to be an interesting point, but I

would like to see more arguments for why this is in fact so. You can always draw a tight circle of likeminded people who agree on some fundamentals and then say that everyone outside that circle disagree with themselves, and this serves as an argument that they are not approaching truth. This was, in fact, a popular argument during the first Christian centuries repeated by several Church Fathers.

Katherine Dormandy asks whether religious identity enables critical inquiry if a central part of one's belief system is the need to stay loyal to the object of belief. In other words, can religious outlook in fact enable any change? Dormandy argues that it does. She argues for epistemically oriented loyalty, where knowing the other party and approaching higher numbers of correct beliefs is itself part of religious identity.

Isaac Choi takes up G. K. Chesterton's well-known adage about tradition as a democracy of the dead. Choi argues that we cannot blindly follow Chesterton's advice because we know that on some issues our ancestors were not well informed and held obviously erroneous views. Several theologians of the past were not in equal epistemic footing with us. Yet it would be unwise to disregard their witness just because they did not live in our times. Maybe they had access to some accumulated wisdom? Relying on the democracy of the dead requires, according to Choi, investigation into how they in fact reached the conclusion they did, and if those reasons are good, we can count their votes in favor of the position they affirmed. This principle is, in fact, in line with another of Chesterton's famous principles, namely "Chesterton's fence", which has to do with his account of deferring to tradition until one can see that the reasons for it are mistaken.

While reading these essays, I started to wonder whether we might need a better analysis on how affective, aesthetic, moral, conative, and cognitive parts function in religious belief formation. This might help us to make better sense on what we are disagreeing about and why, when we disagree in religious contexts. All in all, this collection offers a wide range of learned perspectives and it helpfully locates the crucial points of disagreement about religious disagreement. As a cutting-edge analysis by the leading experts, it also shows how religious disagreement is a uniquely messy topic. Several authors call for humility and temperance in discussing these matters and everyone involved in the discussion would do well in following them.

References

Kvanvig, Jonathan L. 2018. *Faith and Humility*. Oxford University Press.