

## Introduction to Section II: The Epistemic Consequences of Religious Diversity<sup>1</sup>

Dormandy/Wiertz/Jonkers

Growing awareness of religious diversity has made it increasingly difficult to take one's own beliefs about religious matters for granted. This development has led to philosophical discussions about the nature of religious truth (a question addressed in the first part of the present volume), and about what impact religious diversity has on our claims to know it. This latter, epistemological, question is the topic of the second part of the present volume. It turns on an argument (or better, on a group of arguments, as Cottingham shows in his chapter), according to which religious diversity epistemically undermines religious belief systems. We will sketch this argument as a background for the following chapters by Cottingham, Wiertz, Dormandy, and Grube, which we will finish by summarizing.

One way to understand a belief system is a set of beliefs that stand in epistemic relationship with each other. John Cottingham further clarifies the idea of *religious* beliefs as constituted by their role in the life of the believer. However, this introduction will consider religious beliefs in terms of their *content*, the truth of which the argument from religious diversity impugns. Of course, what characterizes distinctly *religious* content is highly controversial. For present purposes we will rely on our intuitive ability to recognize paradigmatic examples of religious beliefs; such beliefs often, for example, postulate or imply the existence of a transcendent reality, or prescribe certain ways of living in the light of such a reality.

### 1. The Argument from Religious and Philosophical Diversity

The argument that diversity undermines beliefs about religious matters goes like this:

#### The Argument from Religious and Philosophical Diversity

1. There are many people whose beliefs about religious matters are incompatible with mine, yet whose epistemic qualifications are on a par with mine. (**The Diversity Claim**)
2. If there are many people whose beliefs about religious matters are incompatible with mine, yet whose epistemic qualifications are on a par with mine, then I should abandon my own beliefs or reduce the confidence with which I hold them.
3. Conclusion: I should abandon my own beliefs or reduce the confidence with which I hold them.<sup>2</sup>

This argument applies not just to those who subscribe to the teachings of a particular religion, but also to those who endorse a particular philosophical position concerning religious diversity, such as exclusivism or pluralism. For this reason we focus generally on *beliefs about religious matters*, and not narrowly on *religious beliefs*.

Let's look at premise 1, the Diversity Claim. This claim, if true, amounts to *evidence* against one's own beliefs about religious matters. Evidence is an indication that a particular proposition is true or false, perhaps with a certain probability. Some evidence, namely true and deductively valid premises, entails the truth or falsehood of propositions that it supports or opposes. But evidence is not always truth-entailing. Much or probably most evidence offers merely *inductive* support to a proposition,

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<sup>1</sup> Much of this discussion is translated and adapted from Katherine Dormandy's "Religiöse Vielfalt und Religiöser Dissens", forthcoming in the *Handbuch analytischer Theologie* (Handbook of Analytic Theology), ed. Klaus Viertbauer and Georg Gasser, forthcoming with Metzler Verlag.

<sup>2</sup> Cottingham (this volume) formulates this conclusion as the claim that religious beliefs lack epistemic respectability; on Wiertz's construal it says that an agnostic position is the only rational option.

and is therefore logically compatible with its falsehood. For example, the fact that a reliable meteorologist predicts rain speaks in favor of rain, but does not exclude the possibility that it will not rain. Evidence can be understood for present purposes as a person's representational experiences or her justified beliefs (Conee/Feldman 2007), for these represent things that are candidates for being the case.

Two beliefs are *incompatible* if they cannot both be true. For example, the Christian belief that Jesus is both human and divine is incompatible with the Muslim belief that he was merely human, at least as these beliefs are most naturally interpreted (but see Potter 2013). Every religious belief system, and every philosophical approach to religious truth (pluralism, exclusivism, etc.), is incompatible with many others. Even pluralism, which claims that all of the belief systems of the great world religions are true,<sup>3</sup> is incompatible both with religious exclusivism and with every religious belief system that holds itself to be exclusively true.

A person's *epistemic qualifications* are factors that are relevant to attaining true beliefs and avoiding false ones.<sup>4</sup> This includes the possession of epistemic virtues, good evidence, and competence in evaluating it. If a person has good evidence about a topic and evaluates it carefully and virtuously, he can be expected to be in a good position to form true beliefs and avoid false ones about this topic. Moreover, if his epistemic qualifications are on a par with yours, then it seems that his chances of achieving true beliefs are at least as high as yours. It must be noted, however, that epistemic parity does not imply that you have the *same* epistemic qualifications as your interlocutor. You each presumably have different bodies of evidence, different epistemic skill sets and virtues, and so forth.

The term *epistemic peer* is often applied to people whose epistemic qualifications are on a par with ours (see Feldman/Warfield 2010; Feldman 2007). Attempts to define epistemic peerhood proliferate (see Feldman 2007); some are so narrow that only people with *exactly the same evidence and epistemic abilities* make the cut. Yet when it comes to beliefs about religious matters (whether religious or philosophical), this notion must be construed as broadly as possible. There is little chance otherwise that there even are epistemic peers with conflicting beliefs in the highly complex area of religion (King 2012), a result that would fly in the face of the widespread phenomenon to which the Diversity Claim calls out attention – namely, that there are people who disagree with us about religion yet who are apparently worthy of the utmost epistemic respect.

Much speaks in favor of premise 1. The world is large and varied. Surely no individual person or community – religious or philosophical – can have *all* of the evidence of relevance to religious matters, not least because, as Cottingham argues (2005, chapter 5 and this volume), participation in a particular religion is necessary to obtain certain sorts of evidence about religion to begin with. Nor can any single person or community develop all of the relevant epistemic competences, let alone to the same extent. Moreover, it is likely that most of us know people who disagree with us, for whom we have the highest intellectual and personal respect, who have extensive life experience and competences. And even if we don't know many such people personally, most of us have ample evidence that they exist. It would be the height of intellectual arrogance, the proponent of the argument maintains, to think that *our* evidence and competence are epistemically superior to those of anyone who disagrees with us.

Let us turn to premise 2: that the Diversity Claim demands abandoning or at least reducing the confidence of one's own beliefs about religious matters. The reason why it ostensibly does so is that it provides evidence against their truth. Proponents of the Argument from Religious and Philosophical Diversity differ over precisely what doxastic reaction within this range is appropriate. Whatever the case, the strength of the appropriate reaction depends on *how strongly* the Diversity Claim speaks against our own beliefs. If it speaks strongly enough, we simply cannot justifiably maintain our own beliefs at all (Schellenberg 2007, Feldman 2007). If by contrast it speaks somewhat

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<sup>3</sup> In his later texts, Hick expands his thesis to include more local religions too.

<sup>4</sup> It is merely for simplicity that we here exclude a broader range of epistemic aims, such as understanding or wisdom.

less strongly, then there might be room to maintain our own beliefs, albeit less confidently (Gutting 1982, McKim 2001, Quinn 2000); Wiertz (this volume) discusses this matter further.

There are two ways in which the Diversity Claim speaks against our own beliefs. The first is indirect: The fact of religious diversity among peers undermines the idea that the reasoning and evidence supporting each person's beliefs are truth-conducive. This is not a direct attack on the truth of the beliefs, for poorly produced beliefs can still be true. The Diversity Claim gives rise to two ways in which the indirect undermining of one's own beliefs might occur. On the one hand, disagreeing interlocutors might have much of the same evidence as I do (such as philosophical arguments) and be just as competent, in general, at evaluating it as I am; this fact can call my own evaluation of this sort of evidence into question. On the other hand, disagreeing interlocutors might have very different evidence than I do – a likely eventuality in the case of religion, where personal experiences tend to play an important evidential role for religious believers. What the Diversity Claim calls attention to here is that I there is evidence that I lack and that points away from the truth of my own beliefs and toward the truth of competing beliefs; if I had had this other evidence, then I may well have formed different beliefs.<sup>5</sup>

The second way in which the Diversity Claim speaks against one's own beliefs is direct. It calls attention to a feature of reality that we would not have expected had one's own beliefs been true. What this feature is varies depending on what one's own belief system is. If for instance I subscribe in an exclusivist way to a particular religious belief system, then the surprise is the fact that many other people do not subscribe to it. Why is this a surprise? Because most exclusivist religious belief systems hold that the transcendent reality, or God, is all-good and all-powerful, even perfectly so. Yet it is not in the character of such a being to select a relatively small group of people to enjoy religious enlightenment while leaving everyone else in the dark. So the world thus looks very different to the way it would be if one of the exclusivist religious belief systems were true, disconfirming such belief systems.

Pluralists argue, by contrast, that the Diversity Claim is *exactly* what one would expect to be true given their view. After all, what could better explain the great wealth of religious experiences and traditions (Hick 2000, 59) than the truth of *every* religious belief system? Because of this, the thought goes, the Diversity Claim does not just speak against exclusivist religious belief systems, but it speaks *for* pluralism.

On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that not even pluralism is safe from the Argument from Religious and Philosophical Diversity. Although pluralists are right in thinking that their view predicts the existence of religious diversity, the world has several other features that pluralism predicts would not occur. First, in a pluralistic world, atheism is a complete surprise. For if transcendent reality truly revealed itself through a variety of cognitive systems and cultures, it would surely have prevented so many people from utterly failing to recognize it. For similar reasons, second, the existence of *exclusivist* world religions – that is, religions that reject pluralism – is deeply surprising. So religious (and secular) diversity encompass phenomena that cannot be explained by pluralism on its own; this means that these phenomena are direct evidence against pluralism. Moreover, we must not forget that the Diversity Claim also speaks against pluralism *indirectly*, since it calls into question the reliability of the reasoning and other processes that gave rise to it – after all, many people with apparently comparable epistemic qualifications to pluralists reject pluralism. The Argument from Religious and Philosophical Diversity thus speaks against pluralism just as it does against exclusivism.

When a piece of evidence speaks against a proposition, logically it must speak *for* its negation. Which logical alternative to exclusivism and pluralism does the Diversity Claim support? It does not speak for naturalism, the view that there is no transcendent reality at all; for if naturalism were true, we would not expect, at least not without controversial auxiliary assumptions, that so many people would adopt religious belief systems. The logical alternative to exclusivism and pluralism that the Diversity Claim supports instead is what we may call the *epistemic inaccessibility view*. On this view, insight about transcendent reality is distributed patchily and among the various religions and

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<sup>5</sup> Dormandy (this volume) develops this argument but draws a different, positive, conclusion from it.

philosophies of religion, because the metaphysical and epistemological breach between us and transcendent reality, as Cottingham (this volume) discusses, can only be bridged imperfectly. The phenomena associated with religious diversity speak evidentially *for* the epistemic inaccessibility view, since the complex and confusing situation in which we find ourselves is exactly what it predicts. They speak against any belief systems that construe themselves exclusivistically or pluralistically.

## 2. Replies to the Argument from Religious and Philosophical Diversity

The Argument from Religious and Philosophical Diversity, as we saw, concludes that Diversity Claim demands at least weakening and at most abandoning one's own beliefs about religious matters. Yet opponents of the argument hold that we can in certain circumstances maintain our own beliefs about religion or the philosophy of religion just as they are. There are two strategies for arguing this.

One strategy is to deny premise 1, the Diversity Claim. This works by dividing this claim into its two conjuncts and denying one of them. The first conjunct, that there is a diversity of belief systems concerning religious matters, is uncontroversial. It is the second conjunct that opponents of the Argument from Religious and Philosophical Diversity deny: that the epistemic qualifications of disagreeing interlocutors are on a par with one's own. We may call this conjunct the *Epistemic-Parity Claim*. If this conjunct is false, then so, of course, is the whole premise.

This strategy is employed primarily by defenders of religious belief systems who construe their truth claims exclusivistically. One example is the Calvinist-inspired approach of Plantinga (2000a). On his view, human beings suffer the so-called "noetic effects of sin", which impede religious knowledge. God, however, repairs the cognitive faculties of a select group, enabling its members, by means of religious experiences, to perceive traces of divine reality in the world. This approach provides a reason to favor one's own belief-forming processes on religious matters over those of disagreeing interlocutors. On top of this, it provides an auxiliary belief to explain the surprising datum that many people have false beliefs about religion: namely, because God declined to repair their cognitive faculties. Why he did so, however, is not discussed. None of the authors in the second part of the present volume accept this argument for religious exclusivism, whether because of its apparent arbitrariness or because they regard it as incompatible with respectful dialogue with religious others. Yet nor do the following chapters embrace pluralism, on the grounds that this view, as we saw, has problems of its own.

The second strategy for responding to the Argument from Religious and Philosophical Diversity is to deny its conclusion. Proponents of this move, discussed by Wiertz (this volume), standardly appeal to the cumulative evidence of one's own religious tradition and experiences (Alston 1991, Plantinga 2000a, Gellman 2000), which we may call *partialist* evidence (Dormandy 2018). Such evidence, the thought goes, supports one's own beliefs so well that it would be irrational to abandon or even weaken them; this means that either the first or second premise of the Argument from Religious and Philosophical Diversity must be false. This strategy has the advantage of committing its proponents to no specific explanation for the supposed epistemic inferiority of disagreeing interlocutors. It enables them instead to withhold judgment on this issue, or simply to suppose that, even though disagreeing interlocutors are reasonable and have done their epistemic best, they simply – and blamelessly – worked from misleading evidence. This strategy can, but need not, be combined with the first one.

A third strategy is proposed by Grube (this volume). He denies the second premise, arguing that it *is* epistemically acceptable to hold fast to one's own beliefs, even in the face of the disagreement of interlocutors on a par with oneself. That is, it is acceptable as long as one's own beliefs are justified, which Grube understands in a way that is permissive enough to withstand the counterevidence of the Diversity Claim.

All three strategies have an important feature in common: they rely heavily on partialist evidence. It is this feature that proponents of the Argument from Religious and Philosophical Diversity reject, claiming that evidence of this sort is good for nothing. *Every* religious belief system, they say, has its own time-honored traditions and impressive religious experiences which, from its own internal point of view, appear incontrovertible evidence. Examined from the outside, however, the evidence

supporting each competing belief system is symmetrical in strength and function with the evidence supporting every other. There is simply no neutral way to adjudicate between the various traditions. Partialist evidence, then, is epistemically useless.

The charge, in other words, is that the Diversity Claim has implications not just for one's own religious and philosophical belief system, but also for the "meta-question" of which epistemology governs the formation of beliefs about these matters to begin with. Proponents of the Argument from Religious and Philosophical Diversity say that the right epistemology is one that favors a certain kind of evidence about religion: evidence is *impartialist* – that does *not* stem from this or that particular tradition or set of experiences, but is rather intersubjectively accessible (i.e., that can be communicated from one person to another and that makes or implies no tradition-specific assumptions; Dormandy 2018). Impartialist evidence includes, for example, philosophical arguments, academic investigations into religious texts, and uncontroversial empirical phenomena such as the fact of religious diversity. Only in the light of such evidence can one be in a position to neutrally evaluate belief systems about religious matters.

Exclusivist opponents of the Argument from Religious and Philosophical Diversity, however, deny that impartialist evidence about religious matters deserves to be weighted so heavily. The restriction to this sort of evidence, they argue, yields a prejudice against belief systems that construe themselves exclusivistically. It is rather partialist evidence through which ultimate reality, or God, tends to reveal himself to human beings. As Cottingham argues (this volume), evidence about religious matters can frequently *only* be gathered from within the religious framework itself. On top of this, most religious believers depend heavily on partialist evidence to support their own religious beliefs, so delegitimizing this evidence would yield vast religious skepticism.

What are we to make of this debate? Both sides have insights. To see this, consider that every person sees the world through his or her own perspective. On the one hand, opponents of the Argument from Religious and Philosophical Diversity are right that one's own perspective can yield insights that are otherwise difficult to come by. Excluding partialist – or perspective-dependent – evidence thus risks missing aspects of any religious reality that there may be. On the other hand, proponents of the argument are right that one cannot rely *just* on one's own perspective, for perspectives unavoidably *limit* our viewpoint too. For this reason, impartialist evidence, which is less constrained by one's own perspective, is also important. The correct epistemology for beliefs about religious matters in the light of religious and philosophical diversity, then, is what Dormandy has elsewhere called an *egalitarian* epistemology (2018; see also Wiertz's and Dormandy's contributions to this volume): this emphasizes the epistemic importance of partialist as well as impartialist evidence in pursuit of a complete picture of religious reality.

What does an egalitarian epistemology have to say about the Argument from Religious and Philosophical Diversity? The fact of diversity and the apparent epistemic parity of disagreeing interlocutors, i.e., the Diversity Claim, is itself a piece of impartialist evidence; this means that egalitarianism accords it a certain epistemic weight. One cannot, just on the basis of partialist evidence, simply deny either the epistemic parity of disagreeing interlocutors or the argument's conclusion. This means that it will likely be difficult to hold one's own beliefs about religious matters with the heights of confidence that one might ideally like to (Ward 2000, 121). At the very least, a weak version of the conclusion of the Argument from Religious and Philosophical Diversity will likely – though not necessarily – hold, at least if one starts off from a very high degree of certainty already. How much of a weakening this would involve, however, is a case-by-case matter.

The replies to the Argument from Religious and Philosophical Diversity that we have discussed so far are defensive. Any weakening of one's own religious and philosophical confidence is seen as a threat. A similar defensive attitude can often be found in religious communities, which aim to discourage or even suppress the beliefs of those who disagree with community doctrine. This defensive reaction is psychologically comprehensible, but differs emphatically from the attitude to disagreement in other areas, such as science. Philosophers of science have long argued powerfully that, when people with diverse experiences and incompatible beliefs engage in respectful disagreement with each other, each can learn from the insights of the other (Longino 1990; De Cruz/De Smedt 2013). Here, a weakening of one's own confidence is not regarded as an epistemic

failure but rather as the result of a sharpening and nuancing of one's own understanding. For this reason parallel discussions have developed about the possible epistemic benefits of religious diversity and disagreement, not least by Wiertz and Dormandy in this volume. The worry that religious commitment is incompatible with this sort of exploratory attitude is discussed by Dormandy (forthcoming (a)).

This brief discussion provides the background for the following contributions, each of which wrestles in its own way with the epistemic problems, approaches, and arguments arising from the phenomenon of religious diversity.

### **3. Summary of the Contributions to Section II**

John Cottingham examines the common view that the epistemic respectability of religious beliefs is undermined by religious diversity. In the second part of his paper, he compares the situation of religious diversity to that of the diversity of scientific beliefs; in the latter case there is a hope that contrasting theories will eventually converge on the truth, constrained by "the way things are"; but the implausibility of such a hope in the religious case threatens the idea that religious beliefs could aspire to the status of knowledge. He proposes an attitude of humility, which involves accepting the inevitable epistemic finitude of human existence. This is especially relevant in the case of religious knowledge, since all great monotheistic religions hold God to be incomprehensible. Cottingham concludes by arguing that, even if this problem can be resolved on a theoretical level, a practical problem remains for the believer. This concerns how commitment, which is necessary for a religious faith to flourish, can combine with respect for different, but equally powerful, commitments of those belonging to different faiths – commitments which one recognizes could well have been one's own had things been different. The supposedly insoluble epistemic problem of religious diversity thus gives way to a universal human longing for meaning which finds expression in different forms.

Like Cottingham, Oliver Wiertz starts by examining an argument claiming that religious diversity threatens the epistemic status of religious beliefs. He notes, however, that it is often unclear which epistemological categories are at issue. To clarify matters, he appeals to the various epistemic values laid out in William Alston's epistemic-desiderata approach. Wiertz argues that in none of Alston's categories does religious diversity destroy the positive epistemic status of religious beliefs – though he says that it can impede many desiderata. His main conclusion is that the believer cannot take the truth of her own religious beliefs for granted, but must scrutinize whether and how other religious traditions compare to hers epistemically. This sort of intellectual and moral attitude may result in a deeper understanding of one's own tradition. In the concluding methodological remarks, Wiertz claims that the situation of religious diversity favors epistemologically internalist approaches, which focus on cognitively accessible reasons for one's beliefs, in contrast to externalist stances which do not make this demand. He finishes by encouraging philosophers of religion not to ignore the particularity of religious doctrines, since these influence our judgments about the epistemic depth and seriousness of other religions and hence provide resources for dealing with them rationally.

Dormandy's contribution focuses on the epistemic potential of religious plurality, in particular when it comes to reasoning about matters of public policy. Her aim is to address the impasse between certain political secularists, who argue that religious beliefs are illegitimate as a basis for public policy, and certain religious activists, who argue that their own religious beliefs are the only legitimate basis for public policy. These two opposing views, she notes, share the assumption that it is good to exclude certain viewpoints from the table and effectively suppress disagreement about them. It is this assumption that she argues against in her paper. Far from threatening one's own foundational worldview, or impede society from constructing reasonable public policy, foundational-worldview disagreement about public policy, engaged in respectfully, can be epistemically beneficial. It can challenge our unquestioned assumptions, deliver evidence we would otherwise miss, and expose us to new epistemic alternatives. It can also combat the epistemically limiting groupthink prevalent in secular and religious communities alike, particularly when matters of public policy are on the table.

Dirk-Martin Grube takes a similar, positive, attitude toward the fact of religious plurality, focusing on the theoretical foundations needed for a constructive approach to interreligious dialogue. He proposes that the *bivalence* or *tertium non datur* principle does not apply to religious truth. Instead, the concept of justification is more promising. Whereas bivalent truth implies that one person is right and another wrong, the softer concept of justification allows people to hold their own beliefs without being committed to denying others the right to hold to theirs. In this way, the shift of emphasis from bivalent truth to justification allows for religious plurality without sacrificing a realist theory of truth, according to which truth means portraying reality properly. Grube concludes by distinguishing two different kinds of disagreement: disagreements in which we take our interlocutor's beliefs to be straightforwardly false, and disagreements in which we take her beliefs to be justified. Only in the latter case, Grube argues, is there is room for robust dialogue.

We are confident that the contributions to this section will advance existing conversations about the epistemic consequences of religious diversity, as well as open up new ones.

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