

Katherine Dormandy  
University of Innsbruck

## The Loyalty of Religious Disagreement

(penultimate draft, final version in: *Religious Disagreement and Pluralism*, eds. Matthew A. Benton and Jonathan Kvanvig, Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 238-270)

### Abstract

Religious disagreement, like disagreement in science, stands to deliver important epistemic benefits. But religious communities tend to frown on it. A salient reason is that, whereas scientists should be neutral toward the topics they discuss, religious believers should be loyal to God; and religious disagreement, they argue, is disloyal. For it often involves discussion with people who believe more negatively about God than you do, putting you at risk of forming negative beliefs yourself. And forming negative beliefs about someone, or even being open to doing so, is disloyal. A loyal person, says the objector, should instead exhibit *doxastic partiality*, doing her best to believe positively about the other party even at the cost of accuracy. I discuss two arguments from doxastic partiality that aim to show that religious disagreement is typically disloyal. I argue that *even given* doxastic partiality, religious disagreement is *not* typically disloyal, and can in fact be loyal. But then I argue that doxastic partiality is false. A superior form of loyalty is *epistemically oriented*: concerned with knowing the other party as she really is. This opens up new ways in which religious disagreement for the sake of learning about God can be loyal to him.

### 1. Introduction

Scientific disagreement can bring great insight, especially when the interlocutors are apt to have different perspectives because they have diverse backgrounds and social locations (Longino 1990; Anderson 1995; Cruz and Smedt 2013). I have argued that the same applies to *religious* disagreement, that is, disagreement over the nature or existence of ultimate reality and what this means for how we should live (Dormandy 2018a, 2018b, 2020a, 2020b). This includes disagreement with people from other religious traditions, confessions, or denominations; adherents of other religions or none; and people from non-authoritative social locations in one's own religious community.

The sort of disagreement I have in mind is *epistemically oriented* – it aims at achieving epistemic improvements, as opposed to just mutual tolerance. Epistemically oriented religious disagreement is an important source of external criticism, it can reveal bias in our own belief-forming practices, it can offer up new epistemic possibilities, and it can lessen prejudice against other people and their views.

Despite these possible benefits, many religious communities are uncomfortable with religious disagreement. Disagreement is well and good for science, they say. But scientists approach their subject matter neutrally, following their evidence where it leads, whereas religious believers should be *committed* – to their tradition, community, and especially to God, or however they construe the divine. This is especially so in religious traditions that regard God as personal, and religious commitment as relationship, or the quest for

relationship, with him.<sup>1</sup> Epistemically oriented religious disagreement, such communities argue, has no place in the life of a committed believer. God has graciously gifted us with revelations about what he is like and how we should live. When a friend opens up and offers you her truth and emotional connection, it is typically inappropriate to seek third parties, including those who may think poorly of her, for their dissenting opinions. Epistemically oriented disagreement about your friend in this case is disloyal to her; along similar lines, epistemically oriented religious disagreement is disloyal to God.

The reason is that this sort of religious disagreement seems to play fast and loose with God's gracious gift of revealed truths, failing to treat them with the respect and seriousness that they deserve, and even putting it at risk as you entertain alternatives. One particular sort of belief that many religious communities want to protect (certainly not the only one) is beliefs that state or imply that God is in one way or another *good*. Often, a disagreeing interlocutor may view God more negatively than the believer does, at least by the lights of the latter's received beliefs. The disagreeing interlocutor may think, for example, that God is less likely to exist, less perfect, that he is not personal (where the received beliefs construe personhood as a great good), that he *is* personal (where the received beliefs construe personhood as a limitation), and so forth. When a believer engages in epistemically oriented religious disagreement with an interlocutor who construes God more negatively than she does, she seems ready to at least entertain the idea, herself, of downgrading her view of God by the lights of her received beliefs. And this, goes the worry, would be disloyal. Behind this worry stands the idea, called *doxastic partiality*, that believing positively about someone, or at least being strongly disposed to, is an expression of loyalty (Keller 2004; Stroud 2006; Hazlett 2013). So believing negatively, or being open to doing so, is a form of what we may call *doxastic disloyalty*. Relationships with God are no exception; indeed, negative beliefs about God, or an openness to forming them, are a great danger to one's faith in him.

The worry is that engaging in epistemically oriented religious disagreement with someone who construes God more negatively than you is doxastically disloyal. One reason is that this sort of disagreement seems to indicate an uncharitable mindset on the believer's part. After all, it is hard to explain why someone would do this unless she suspected that there might be something to the negative beliefs. Another reason is that, even if you did not believe negatively of God already, epistemically oriented disagreement about him certainly puts you at risk of doing so, and this is enough for doxastic disloyalty. If this is so, then, whatever the epistemic benefits of religious disagreement may be, they come at a price that committed believers should not pay.

But I will argue that epistemically oriented religious disagreement is *not* disloyal. On the contrary, it can be loyal. This is so even if doxastic partiality is true. That is, even if believing negatively about God or being open to doing so is disloyal, you can engage in religious disagreement without doing either. But I then argue that doxastic partiality is false. That is, it is *not* disloyal to form, or be open to forming, negative beliefs about the object of your loyalty – including when this is God. So even when religious disagreement does involve negative beliefs about God or an openness to forming some, engaging in it need not be disloyal. It can even, I argue, be loyal. I advance an alternative account of loyalty, *epistemically oriented* loyalty, that construes loyal doxastic behavior not as seeking to believe *positively* about the other party, but as seeking to believe *truly*. Epistemically

---

<sup>1</sup> I follow the tradition of using "he" of God as an imperfect way, in limited language, to refer to a being who is neither male nor female.

oriented loyalty includes abiding by truth-conducive epistemic norms, for the sake of knowing the object of your loyalty as she is.

I'll start with some initial clarifications, including about loyalty (section 2). Then I outline two objections from disloyalty that arises from the doxastic-partiality view. I respond by showing that epistemically oriented religious disagreement does *not* violate doxastic partiality, and can be loyal by its lights (sections 3-5). But then I argue that doxastic partiality is false, so that epistemically oriented religious disagreement can be loyal *even when it involves negative beliefs about God or openness to forming them*; this is where I defend epistemically oriented loyalty (section 6). The conclusion draws together various results (section 7).

## 2. Loyalty, Disloyalty, and Some Preliminaries

### 2.1 Preliminary Clarifications

I'll begin with some clarifications. *Disagreement* occurs when one person believes a proposition  $p$  (or a proposition entailing it), and the other suspends judgment or believes that  $\text{not-}p$  (or a proposition entailing that  $\text{not-}p$ ); it could also occur when both have the same coarse-grained belief that  $p$  but differ in their credences (or subjective probability assignments). The proposition  $p$  could pertain to just about anything, including, importantly, to higher-order epistemic matters – for example, whether some belief or experience counts as evidence in the domain under discussion, or whether and how much some purported evidence supports a belief. *Engaging in epistemically oriented* disagreement with someone amounts to conversing respectfully and charitably about your respective beliefs, focusing particularly (but not only) on the ways in which they are incompatible. Your aim is not particularly to persuade each other (though you need not be opposed to this happening), but more to see what there might be to learn from each other, if anything, about the domain in question.

Here are some of the epistemic benefits, argued for elsewhere, of epistemically oriented religious disagreement (Dormandy 2018a, 2020a, 2020b). First, it is an important source of external criticism: those dissenting from our perspective are better equipped to notice our unquestioned and undefended assumptions. Second, it can reveal the influences of biases to which individuals and communities are susceptible, such as groupthink or the tendency to weight one's own evidence more just because it is one's own. Third, it can expand our evidential basis, challenging our own views to accommodate the evidence supplied by others' research or theorizing (especially in science), or their understanding and lived experiences (especially in religion). Fourth, it can provide new epistemic possibilities that may previously have escaped our radar, perhaps precipitating a shift of probabilities for the alternatives already open to us. And fifth, it might break down prejudices against people who think differently to us, cultivating cognitive flexibility.

Epistemically oriented disagreement cannot do these things by itself; an attitude of mutual respect must be present and communicated. This is especially so when the topic is religion, which is often emotionally laden and linked with interlocutors' sense of identity. But assuming mutual and communicated respect, epistemically oriented religious disagreement can be a source of great insight. In what follows, *religious disagreement* will mean "epistemically oriented religious disagreement".

A note on God. It is important for present purposes to construe him, if he exists, as a personal being. Some philosophers and theologians complicate or reject this construal. But

the idea of a personal God is important. It meshes tightly with the three monotheistic traditions and scriptures, and with the way believers are encouraged to speak and think of God. Moreover, the prospect of loyalty to God, or of God's loyalty to us (for example, of God's keeping his covenant to the descendants of Noah and Abraham), is easiest to make sense of given his personhood. I will thus work here with the assumption that God is personal.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the prospect of believing negatively about God deserves comment. On many traditional views, God is perfect if he exists at all, so any negative belief about him is incoherent. Other views, in contrast, allow for God to be less than perfect, or even have negative qualities (Potter 2000; Wettstein 2012; Hazony 2012). I want to leave room for such views – not only because many traditions espouse them, but also because, even when the doctrine of a given tradition construes God as perfect, it can be natural to feel betrayed by God; take Job as an example. This suggests that, for many believers, the prospect of God's existing but being flawed is more of a live possibility than his not existing at all. I will thus suppose that negative beliefs about God are not only coherent, but that taking them seriously does justice to religious tradition and experience.

## 2.2 Loyalty and Disloyalty

The objector says that the person who engages in religious disagreement conducts herself disloyally toward God. To see what this amounts to, we need an account of *loyal* conduct. Following Keller (2007, chapter 1), we may construe this as involving a certain sort of action performed for a certain sort of motive.

Keller characterizes the action of loyalty as *sticking by* the other person or *taking her side*. This metaphor is an umbrella term that picks out different things in contexts. You might take someone's side by advocating for her, by honoring her through certain rituals, by prioritizing her interests or welfare over those of comparable others, or by identifying with her in the sense of treating her as an extension of yourself (2007, 3-7). I suggest that taking someone's side might also involve casting your lot with her: tying your fate to hers in a way that raises the probability that what happens to her, good or bad, might also happen to you. Keller adds that these sorts of actions, to count as side-taking, must be done with a positive attitude toward the other person, such as respect, reverence, or possibly love (2007, 21).

We may agree with Keller that side-taking can be manifested in these ways. But he that it can also be manifested doxastically, as the inclination to "hold or resist certain beliefs, independently of the evidence" (6). More than this, he holds that *not* showing loyalty in this way is often disloyal. Keller is thus a doxastic partialist. We may accept his general account of side-taking conduct while rejecting this detail, as I will in section 6.

But side-taking conduct, on Keller's view, is not enough to be loyal. In order for your conduct to be loyal, it must also be motivated by an emotional attitude of attachment or association with the other party.<sup>3</sup> This emotional attachment or sense of association is directed toward the other party herself, as opposed to some type that she falls under. "When you are loyal to X", says Keller, "what is presented within your motivation, so to speak, is not only X, but X as something to which you are connected in a special way" (2007, 18).

---

<sup>2</sup> See (Benton 2018b) for an account of personal knowledge applied to relationship with God.

<sup>3</sup> I am characterizing loyal conduct, whereas Keller's aim is an account of *loyalty*. He characterizes this as the emotional attitude of association that disposes you to conduct yourself by taking the other person's side.

Both the side-taking conduct and the motive are necessary for loyal conduct. You can conduct yourself in a side-taking way without this being loyal, for you may not feel yourself to be particularly associated with the other party. For example, you might notice a stranger being harassed on the street and defend him simply because you are disgusted by the cruelty. And you can feel associated with someone and yet, because you fail to take his side in your conduct, fail to conduct yourself loyally; think of Peter's betrayal of Jesus.

Now that we have an account of loyal conduct, we can give an account of *disloyal* conduct, which is what interests our objector. Keller notes that this is more than simply conduct that is not loyal. We are not disloyal to passersby on the street simply because we do not find ourselves motivated by a sense of association to take their side in random altercations. What more is there to disloyal conduct? Keller argues that disloyalty involves a violation of certain normative expectations that arise in your relationship with the other person. A normative expectation is an expectation *of* someone to do something, as opposed to a predictive expectation, which is a belief *that* he will do it. When a person's normative expectation is legitimate, it corresponds to a norm, or an "ought", that governs the situation at hand, so that failing to conduct oneself in accord with it can legitimately offend the other party. Certain sorts of relationship, such as between friends, family members, or sometimes work colleagues, generate norms to conduct yourself loyally;<sup>4</sup> I will call such a relationship a *relationship of loyalty*.

Loyal and disloyal conduct are thus asymmetrical (Keller, 2007). Loyal conduct is possible whether or not you are in a relationship of loyalty, but disloyal conduct is only possible within such a relationship. For example, in the Biblical story, after Ruth's young husband died, Ruth's mother-in-law, Naomi, encouraged Ruth to return to her people to find a new husband. Ruth was thus discharged from a relationship of loyalty to Naomi, so returning to her people would not have been disloyal. But she chose to stay with Naomi, thereby conducting herself loyally nonetheless.

The norms of loyalty respect the dictum that ought implies can: you are only answerable to them to the extent that abiding by them is within your control (Keller, 2007, chapter 10). Suppose for example that a person's conduct in a relationship of loyalty – say, a marriage – fails to be loyal because his emotional association to his partner has disappeared, so that, lacking this motivation, his conduct does not count as loyal.<sup>5</sup> If this has happened through no fault of his own (say, he had an accident that damaged his brain), his lack of loyalty does not count as disloyal. But if his emotional state results from no more than his unilaterally declining to work at the partnership, his non-loyal conduct can count as disloyal. So – and this will be important for later – to the extent that you have control over conduct that fails to be loyal, you are responsible for it and it thus counts as disloyal.

To this account of Keller's, I will add that the norms that arise in a relationship of loyalty are not unconditional. If the object of loyalty does something heinous or violating, such as lying to you or abusing you or others, the norm that you ought to conduct yourself loyally toward her is cancelled. (If *she* still normatively expects loyal conduct from you, she is mistaken.) But this does not mean that there is now an opposing norm requiring you to *cease* conducting yourself loyally; you are merely permitted to cease doing so. You are also permitted to keep conducting yourself loyally, though if the relationship is to be healthy, any

---

<sup>4</sup> Whether these norms are moral or something else is up for debate.

<sup>5</sup> In a relationship of loyalty, not every form of conduct is disloyal; some conduct, for example tooth-brushing, is neutral.

loyal conduct you choose to engage in will presumably take different forms than before (see section 6).

In summary, loyal conduct is conduct in which you take someone's side and are motivated to do so by an emotional attitude of association with her. Disloyal conduct is conduct that, in the context of a relationship that generates norms for loyal conduct, does not meet these norms.

### 3. Doxastic Disloyalty

#### 3.1 Two Types of Doxastic Disloyalty

The objection from disloyalty starts from the two ideas. The first is that religious believers enter into relationships of loyalty with God, and the second is that, in such a relationship, the norms of loyalty mandate the holding of certain received beliefs. These beliefs are seen as gracious gifts from God, and pertain to God himself, his will for human beings, or matters with implications for these, such as which sources are epistemically authoritative. Because holding at least some of these beliefs is normative, says the objector, it is disloyal to stray from them, whether by becoming significantly less confident in them, suspending judgment in them, or disbelieving them entirely.

Why would such changes in your doxastic attitude toward the received beliefs be disloyal? There are (at least) two answers, each corresponding to a different form of (supposed) doxastic disloyalty. One form we may call *disloyalty of difference*. The idea is that adhering to certain beliefs themselves is an important way to side with God, so that any divergence is disloyal. This is so even if alternative beliefs portray God more favorably than the received beliefs. For example, someone with the received belief that God is morally changeable might think it disloyal to switch to believing that he is perfect. This might happen, say, if a majority group that has traditionally oppressed her fellow believers construes God as morally perfect. Switching her beliefs would amount to disloyalty to the God who has upheld her community through the ages. Indeed, many religious disagreements arise with people who do not think of God more negatively than you. But I will not discuss such cases here.

What I will discuss is another form of supposed doxastic disloyalty, introduced in sections 1 and 2.2: believing *negatively* about God, or being open to doing so. Whereas disloyalty of difference can arise for received beliefs with just about any content, this form of supposed disloyalty, which we may call *disloyalty of valence*, concerns their content – specifically, whether they ascribe good or bad characteristics to God. The idea, which we saw that Keller endorses, is that a relationship of loyalty generates norms to be strongly disposed to believe *positively* about the other party. I will show later how the objector motivates this idea (section 3.3). Suffice it for now to note that disloyalty of valence consists in believing negatively about the other party (here, God), or lacking the strong disposition to believe positively.

Fairly clear examples of negative beliefs about God are that he is evil or weak, or, in a liberal sense of being “about him”, though one that religious communities care very much about, nonexistent. Other examples are less clearly negative, such as the belief that God is very good but not perfect, or the belief that he is perfect but not necessarily so. Whether a belief about God counts as negative, for present purposes, depends on a person's received religious beliefs. For example, if her received beliefs are a form of traditional monotheism on which God is perfect, then for her, the claim that he is good but not perfect is apt to be

negative; or if her received beliefs emphasize necessary perfection, then she may regard the attribution of contingent perfection to God as negative. If the received beliefs, in contrast, are a form of open theism, the believer may regard the traditional theist view of God as impassable as negative, on the grounds that it portrays him as uncaring. A tradition emphasizing God's oneness may think that a Trinitarian view downgrades God. And so forth.<sup>6</sup>

More beliefs might count as disloyal in valence than one might at first think. Consider the belief (or the disposition to believe) that Jesus was born not in Bethlehem, but in Bethany. This might not appear to downgrade Jesus. But if your received belief system regards the belief that Jesus was born in Bethlehem as divine revelation, then rejecting it in favor of the Bethany belief may imply that God is the source of an epistemically flawed tradition, and hence is either not fully truthful or not fully sovereign. There may thus be an overlap between beliefs that are considered disloyal by way of difference, and disloyal by way of valence: the very fact of straying from the received belief system may be taken to imply something negative about the God who is its supposed source.

As important as both forms of disloyalty are in religious contexts, our objector is concerned with disloyalty of valence: the forming of negative beliefs about God, or the openness to doing so. In what follows it is disloyalty of valence that the term "doxastic disloyalty" picks out.

This allows us to specify two features of the kinds of religious disagreement targeted by the objector. First, she is concerned only with disagreements with interlocutors at least some of whose beliefs about God are negative by the lights of one's received belief system. Second, one of the topics on which you engage in disagreement is the truth or falsehood of those negative beliefs.

### 3.2 Doxastic Partiality

Why would believing negatively about God, or lacking a special disposition to believe positively, be disloyal?

This objection takes its cue from the doxastic-partiality view introduced in section 1. This view<sup>7</sup> says that the norms of loyalty do not just govern our conduct, but also our beliefs or our belief-forming dispositions. The doxastic norms of loyalty can be summarized, with qualifications to be discussed momentarily, as the expectation to *believe positively about the other party*, and *to be strongly disposed to do so*. Supposing, with the doxastic partialist, that these doxastic norms govern relationships of loyalty in general, then a fortiori they govern relationships of loyalty with God. The doxastic partialist says that it is partly constitutive of loyalty to God (or anyone) to believe positively about him, and be strongly inclined to do so. I'll motivate the doxastic-partiality view in section 3.3; for now some clarification.

To be strongly disposed to believe positively about someone is to be disposed to believe positively *even if doing so might skew the accuracy of your overall picture of him*. In other words, believing positively is the default, so that, in the event of a conflict between believing

---

<sup>6</sup> One topic of religious disagreement may be how positive or negative a given portrayal of God is to begin with.

<sup>7</sup> The doxastic-partiality view is held not just for relationships of loyalty, but for friendship, trust, and love, sometimes because these are taken to involve loyalty, and sometimes for independent reasons. I will not distinguish these types of view here.

positively and believing accurately, the weights will strongly favor believing positively.<sup>8</sup> Below we will have cause to talk of people who lack the disposition to believe positively (which our objector says is disloyal); I will say that such people are *open to forming negative beliefs*.

The objector understands the doxastic-partiality view as prescriptive – that is, as positing a requirement. This is stronger than the evaluative claim that forming negative beliefs and being open to doing so is simply bad-making (yet perhaps the best option given other considerations).<sup>9</sup> The requirement aspect is important, because believing negatively (or being open to doing so) is said to be *disloyal* – it is something that, in the context of such a relationship, one ought not do. Here is the claim:

**The Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim:** Being open to forming, let alone actually forming, negative beliefs about someone in a relationship of loyalty is, all else equal, disloyal to that person.

The Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim has an “all else equal” clause. One thing that has to be “equal” is that there must be something that the believer can do to avoid believing negatively or being open to doing so. For we have seen that conduct over which you have no control whatsoever does not count as disloyal, and beliefs and dispositions to believe are often involuntary. So the all-else-equal clause can be read, at least, as “compatibly with doxastic involuntarism”.

One might think that beliefs and doxastic dispositions are always involuntary, making the Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim empty. But this is too quick. There are indirect ways of influencing, for example, our intellectual character, what evidence we receive or attend to (Keller 2007, chapter 2), the non-evidential social and psychological forces that we are exposed to (e.g. whom we spend time with, whether we are in a charitable mindset (Keller 2007, chapter 2; Stroud 2006), and how we frame apparently negative evidence (e.g. is our friend being unkind or just overenthusiastic?), and so forth. To the extent that such strategies are available, we are responsible for our beliefs and dispositions to believe.

Some argue that compatibility with doxastic voluntarism is *all* that the need be equal. This means that virtually nothing apart from an inability to do otherwise excuses you from forming a negative belief or being open to doing so. Not even evidence pointing toward a negative belief excuses you. This means that, if there is a conflict between forming a positive belief and forming an accurate one, for example because of negative evidence, loyalty requires violating epistemic norms and forming the positive one (if you can). That said, doxastic partialists differ over exactly how egregiously you must violate epistemic norms. At one extreme are those who hold that loyalty demands violating them often and egregiously (Kierkegaard 1983; Stroud 2006); at another are those who say that it demands bending them a little (Keller 2007, chapter 2), with others falling somewhere in between (Hazlett 2013). We may call the cluster of views that construes the all-else-equal clause as “compatibly with doxastic involuntarism, and with the expectation that the believer violates epistemic norms” the *strong* version of the Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim.

---

<sup>8</sup> Strictly speaking one could be disposed to believe positively without ever doing so, but I take it that proponents of the doxastic-partiality view, in its dispositional form (prominently Keller (2007) and Hazlett (2013)), take this disposition to be manifested to a great extent.

<sup>9</sup> See (Crawford 2019) for discussion.



A weaker version of the Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim does not require the believer to violate epistemic norms. This version, which we may call this the *epistemological* doxastic-partiality view, understands the all-else-equal clause as “compatibly with doxastic involuntarism *and epistemic norms*” (Kawall 2013; Hawley 2014). The believer is expected to believe partially, and be disposed to do so, in a way that respects epistemic norms. The epistemological version might not look like a doxastic-partiality view – after all, it seems to say that, if evidence points toward negative characteristics, loyalty permits you to believe negatively of the other party. But proponents of this version posit, in addition to the Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim so understood, the additional claim that epistemic norms are *permissive*, and so easily yield positive beliefs about the object of our loyalty (Kawall 2013; Hawley 2014; Plantinga 2000b; James 1921). An internalist way of cashing this out says for example that, for any given body of evidence and any given proposition that one might believe on its basis, there is typically a range of epistemically acceptable doxastic attitudes, some more positive than others (James 1921; Kelly 2014).<sup>10</sup> The Doxastic-Disloyalty claim, cashed out this way, says that it is disloyal to do anything other than form (or be disposed to form) the most positive belief permitted by epistemic norms.<sup>11</sup>

In whichever form, the objector applies the Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim to relationships of loyalty to God. She supposes, first, that such relationships are possible. Or at least that they are possible for committed religious believers, as long as God exists; whether non-believers can too may be left open. And she supposes, second, that such relationships come with norms of doxastic partiality. That is, that human beings in relationships of loyalty with God must believe partially about him.<sup>12</sup>

### 3.3 Arguments for Doxastic Partiality

Why think that the Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim holds, either in general of relationships of loyalty with God? One category of argument says that doxastic partiality is *intrinsically* loyal, and believing negatively or being open to doing so is intrinsically disloyal. Another category of argument holds that doxastic partiality is *extrinsically* loyal, in the sense of being loyal on account of its consequences, and that believing negatively or being open to doing so is extrinsically disloyal.

Here are three intrinsic arguments for doxastic partiality. First, beliefs are analogous to actions. And partiality in our actions is normative for relationships of loyalty: We treat the objects of our loyalty a special care not extended to third parties. We should thus treat the objects of our loyalty partially in our beliefs too. This means believing (and being disposed to believe) positively about them (Hazlett 2013).

Second, *commitment* is normative for relationships of loyalty, and this includes commitment to the goodness of the other party’s character (Stroud 2006).

Third, the phenomenology of relationships of loyalty is a good guide to their norms, and this favors doxastic partiality: We supposedly feel an impulse to believe well and to be closed (or at least slow) to believing badly of the objects of our loyalty, and when we are the

---

<sup>10</sup> A permissive epistemology developed specifically for religious beliefs can be found in (Plantinga 2000b).

<sup>11</sup> Another epistemological version of the Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim says that epistemic norms are lenient on account of being *context-sensitive*. This says that, when we form high-stakes beliefs (e.g. about objects of our loyalty), the evidential standards must be stricter – it must be *harder* to form negative beliefs. Space prohibits discussing this possibility, but see (Kawall 2013; Benton 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Whether the reverse holds on this view – whether a loyal God must believe partially of human beings – I won’t discuss.

objects of someone else's loyalty, we supposedly want them to do this for us too (Stroud 2006; Keller 2004).

Here is an extrinsic argument for doxastic partiality. Believing positively about the object of loyalty, and being disposed to do so, will strengthen your relationship with her (Stroud 2006). In contrast, believing negatively, or being open to doing so, will put it at risk because it may weaken your incentive to maintain it; and risking your relationship is disloyal. The above arguments, intrinsic and extrinsic, concern loyalty in general. Their application to relationships of loyalty with God is a *fortiori*.

But the extrinsic argument has special importance in the case of God. For a relationship of loyalty with him amounts to religious *faith*, and faith is standardly considered a great religious good, even a virtue (Kvanvig 2018), so that upholding it is loyal and abandoning it disloyal.<sup>13</sup> The proponent of doxastic partiality may add that negative beliefs about God can threaten one's faith. If the belief is that God does not exist, then, if this belief, as some argue, is necessary for faith (Plantinga 2000b; Mugg 2016), the threat is automatic. If the belief is instead that God is not just or good (or that he does not exist, where this *is* compatible with faith), then it is apt to threaten the person's faith psychologically. Doxastic partiality toward God is thus a way to uphold one's faith in him.

I will address these arguments in section 6.3. First I will assume that the Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim holds (in whichever version), and consider more closely two arguments against religious disagreement that feature it, the Explanation Argument (section 4), and the Argument from Risk (section 5). Both contend that engaging in religious disagreement is disloyal because it involves (or is very likely to involve) forming or being open to forming negative beliefs about God. I argue that *even if* the Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim holds, neither argument succeeds in showing that religious disagreement is disloyal. But I finish (section 6) by arguing that the Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim is false too, so that *even if* religious disagreement involves it, this does not automatically make the believer disloyal – on the contrary, it might even be actively loyal conduct.

#### 4. The Explanation Argument

The first argument starts by asking why a believer would engage in religious disagreement to begin with. The most probable explanation, it says, involves her having negative beliefs about God or being open to forming some. After all, unless you at least suspected that the other party were in some way negative or capable of doing something negative, what would interest you in discussing the matter with someone whom you know thinks she is? Negative belief, or openness to it, is very likely to be among the causal factors behind the believer's engaging in disagreement. This argument concludes that a case of religious disagreement, given the Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim, is very likely to be disloyal.

The intuition that negative belief (or openness to it) is likely to be a causal factor in (epistemically oriented) religious disagreement is plausible. One source is the following sort of case.<sup>14</sup> Consider Othello, who engages in open-minded discussion about the character of

---

<sup>13</sup> But for an argument that it can be loyal to be ready to abandon one's faith, see (Dormandy 2018c).

<sup>14</sup> (Buchak 2012, 234) uses a similar case to motivate the intuition that faith entails declining to seek evidence. A husband has an envelope containing information about whether his spouse has betrayed him. Seeking new evidence in the form of opening it, she says, indicates a lack of faith. Faith overlaps significantly with loyalty, and one way to seek evidence is to engage in epistemically oriented religious disagreement. Much as Buchak's aims and use of this case differ from the present objector's, I take its use here to be in the spirit of her view. Moreover, analogies between religious faith or loyalty and spousal fidelity are common.

his life partner, Desdemona, with Iago, whom Othello knows thinks that Desdemona has been unfaithful. This exercise would make little sense, says the objector, unless Othello were at least willing to entertain the idea that Desdemona is not beyond suspicion. Othello's willingness to entertain this idea will very probably feature in the explanation for his engaging in epistemically oriented disagreement with Iago about Desdemona's character. An analogous point holds for disagreement about God with someone who holds beliefs about God that are (by the light of the received belief system) negative. It is very probably motivated by negative beliefs about God, or at least by an openness to forming some.

I will return to this analogy below. Suffice it for now to agree that negative beliefs, or an openness to forming them, can surely explain, in many cases, why someone would engage in epistemically oriented religious disagreement. But lest this possible explanation get too great a portion of our probability distribution, I will present an alternative.

A believer might engage in religious disagreement *without* believing or being open to believing anything negative about God. Take Hildegard, for instance, who is simply fascinated to learn about him from a variety of angles. She might hope to learn, for example, how other religious belief systems and their adherents reflect God's manifold creativity, what they reveal about God's abundant common grace, and how he may be at work in others' lives. Hildegard might do this fully expecting to learn only more positive things about him. Indeed, her positive image of God might be what motivated her to do this to begin with.

That this alternative explanation also enjoys some probability is supported by a *disanalogy* between the religious case and the Othello case. One prominent way in which people form beliefs about God, more so than about human beings, is by comparing notes with other people who know about him or at least claim to do so. For God, unlike human beings, is not localizable to time and place, and does not predictably manifest himself on demand. (An exception in certain ways, according to Christians, is the briefly incarnated Christ – but even here we only have others' say-so.) So we depend much *more*, for knowledge of God, on comparing notes with others. Yet human viewpoints are limited and fallible, even those of divinely guided religious communities. It only makes sense, for someone longing to learn about God, indeed to *increase* the number of excellent things she believes about him, to construe the open-minded sharing of perspectives and traditions as an excellent way to do so. So a believer can engage in religious disagreement without any negative beliefs about God or openness to such beliefs – and thus without falling foul of the Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim.

But why, the objector might wonder, would a believer such as Hildegard seek such enlightenment from outside the safety of her religious community and its teachings? One reason is that no group, even one whose beliefs are divinely inspired, is immune to epistemically problematic phenomena such as groupthink, bias, and the influence of ideology (Dormandy 2020b). Another is that religious disagreement is a way to allow God to be who he is. Surely a wonderful or perfect divine creator of the universe can astound in ways that an individual believer, or her temporally and spatially located religious community, could not have imagined. One way to give him this leeway is to see how he might manifest himself in unexpected ways.

So a believer such as Hildegard is not disloyal. But more than this, *she can also be loyal*. First, her religious disagreement, as we saw, may be motivated by an emotional attitude of association with God. Second, her disagreement can be a way of taking God's side. After all, her aim is to know God better as he is, and there is a decent chance, if my arguments elsewhere for its epistemic benefits are on target (Dormandy 2018a, 2020b), that it may

help. So engaging in religious disagreement can constitute *loyal* conduct, even supposing that the Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim is true. Moreover, I suggest that it is not particularly less probable that a given disagreement involve a believer like Hildegard than one like Othello.

But the next objection disputes this conclusion. It considers another argument that, even for believers like Hildegard, religious disagreement is disloyal after all.

## 5. The Argument from Risk

The Explanation Argument looks backward. It notes that a particular believer engages in (epistemically oriented) religious disagreement, and works back to the supposedly most probable cause: a negative belief about God or an openness to forming one. I just argued that an alternative, and not improbable, cause is enthusiasm to know God better, and that disagreement, when so motivated, can be a way of taking God's side and thus be loyal.

But one might think that this conclusion is overhasty. Well-intentioned as a believer such as Hildegard may be, she should know that she is taking a grave risk in exposing herself to the influence of beliefs that she would be disloyal for holding or even considering, supposing the Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim is true. Because of this, engaging in religious disagreement does *not* take God's side. It sides against him: Hildegard is unfortunately conducting herself disloyally. This is the jist of the Argument from Risk. This argument is thus forward-looking: regardless of why a particular believer engages in religious disagreement, the large risk that it runs of doxastic disloyalty typically makes doing it disloyal.

Here is the argument step by step:

### Argument from Risk

1. Engaging in epistemically oriented religious disagreement runs a substantial risk of bringing you to form negative beliefs about God, or of opening you up to doing so (and thus of being disloyal all-else-equal). **(The Risk Claim)**
2. This risk of (all-else equal) disloyalty is typically substantial enough that even taking it is disloyal. **(The Substantiality Claim)**
3. Conclusion: It is typically disloyal to engage in epistemically oriented religious disagreement. (from 1, 2, and the Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim)

We may grant premise 1, that engaging in religious disagreement runs a substantial risk of bringing you to form, or become open to, negative beliefs about God. (That doing this is also *disloyal* I am accepting for argument's sake, pending section 6.) What premise 2, the Substantiality Claim, adds that this risk is *substantial enough that running it typically constitutes disloyal conduct*. This is the premise that I will dispute.

I'll begin with some clarifications. The "typically" is meant to exclude highly unusual cases not of interest here. But why think that engaging in religious disagreement typically runs such a substantial risk? One reason is evidential. Since your interlocutor believes more negatively about God than you, engaging open-mindedly with her is apt to deliver evidence pointing to a more negative view of God than yours (at least by your lights); this is especially so if she is epistemically and morally admirable. Your exchange may even deliver evidence *mandating* negative beliefs about God, or at least a lowering of confidence in positive ones;

the epistemic pressure could also weaken your disposition to believe positively.<sup>15</sup> Note that even permissive evidence can mandate, if all of the doxastic attitudes in the acceptable range are negative. Resisting epistemic pressure can be a psychological challenge: it takes nerve to know what a norm requires and consciously defy it. But second, even if the negative evidence that you risk receiving does not mandate a negative doxastic response, the fact that you have received it could unexpectedly shake your confidence for purely psychological reasons (Plantinga 2000, 189).

One response to premise 2, the Substantiality Claim, is to deny it by rejecting the “typically”: engaging in religious disagreement does *not* typically run such a substantial risk of forming (or becoming open to forming) a negative belief about God that simply doing so is disloyal. Recall the all-else-equal clause. On both versions of the doxastic-partiality view, this clause ensures that you do not count as disloyal if you form a negative belief (or become open to doing so) *involuntarily*. And on the epistemological version of the view, this clause also ensures that you do not count as disloyal if you are obeying epistemic norms. For this reason, one might think that the doxastic-partiality view fails to kick in. Surely a believer who engages in religious disagreement for perfectly loyal reasons, and winds up forming a negative belief or becoming open to doing so, will be exempted from disloyalty by the all-else-equal clause. This is what is typical – not, *pace* Premise 2, a substantial risk of doxastic disloyalty. On this line of reasoning, premise 2 is false.

But this response does not work. Consider first doxastic involuntarism, which excuses the believer on both versions of the doxastic-partiality view. The fact that the believer’s response to her negative evidence was involuntary does not exempt her from the charge of disloyalty. After all, engaging in disagreement to begin with it was within her voluntary control. Consider an analogy: you are not exempt from responsibility for what you do when you have chosen to get drunk. A similar point applies when we consider obedience to epistemic norms. We may suppose (along with the proponents of the epistemological version of the doxastic-partiality view) that epistemic norms do not mandate engaging in religious disagreement. This means that the believer was not epistemically mandated to engage in religious disagreement to begin with, and is hence not exempted from the charge of disloyalty now that she has done so. So the all-else-equal clause does not falsify premise 2: doxastic partialists still have the result that they take to be true, which is that doxastic risk run by the believer who engages in religious disagreement *is* substantial enough to count as disloyal.

### 5.1 Declining Religious Disagreement is Risky Too

I will criticize premise 2, the Substantiality Claim, in a different way. Accepting for argument’s sake the idea that risking negative belief is disloyal, and agreeing with premise 2 that one does run a substantial risk of disloyalty by engaging in religious disagreement, I will argue that this does not suffice to make religious disagreement itself disloyal. The reason is that *declining* to engage in religious disagreement runs a comparably substantial risk of disloyalty. Since both alternative actions are risky, I argue, it is not typically disloyal to perform one or the other; we must take matters on a case-by case-basis.

---

<sup>15</sup> Even if the negative evidence is not strong enough to *mandate*, it might *permit* negative beliefs or a lowering of your confidence in positive ones – so that if you find yourself psychologically distressed by the negative evidence, you may be tempted to accept this permission.

We cannot consider every form of declining religious disagreement. For simplicity I will focus on the form that our objector is most apt to advocate: declining to engage in it on the grounds that doing so is disloyal to God. Assuming that this is motivated by an emotional attitude of association with God, this alternative action appears loyal. In this way it is on a par with engaging in religious disagreement, where this is also motivated by an emotional attitude of association with God. I argued with the case of Hildegard in section 4 that religious disagreement, performed for this motive, can be loyal. But the objector denies this parity. She says that, regardless of how the respective actions appear, the only loyal one of the two, typically, is declining religious disagreement. And the reason arises from the risks that religious disagreement incurs.

But if, as I will argue, declining to engage in religious disagreement because one thinks that it is disloyal *also* runs a substantial risk of disloyalty, then both alternative actions – engaging as well as declining to engage in religious disagreement, even when motivated by an emotional association with God – run a substantial risk of disloyal consequences.

For simplicity I will suppose that the two actions that we are contrasting are the only realistic alternatives. This assumption is not outlandish: a believer motivated by emotional association with God could easily wonder which of the two to perform.

What risks does a person court by declining religious disagreement? Four come to mind. The first two, perhaps surprisingly, involve the believer's forming negative beliefs about God or becoming open to doing so – which is of course disloyal by the objector's lights.

The first risk is that the believer comes to think poorly of God. To see how this might happen, note that there are different ways of thinking of a God who makes declining religious disagreement a criterion of loyalty. He might be like a protective parent wanting to keep his children safe from bad company; a believer content to learn about God within the safe bounds of her religious community might form this picture. But a different sort of believer might rankle under what feels to him like thought-control. Apart from the edict against religious disagreement, this person might not have been tempted to think negatively of God. But given this edict, he may be tempted to think of God as akin to Heinrich Mann's insecure schoolmaster, Professor Unrat. This character insists on rote obedience, feels threatened by lateral thinking and unregulated play, and would prefer a child to keep his uniform clean than to discover new fauna. Thinking of God in this negative way would, by the Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim, be disloyal.

Second, declining religious disagreement on account of its supposed disloyalty might raise the suspicion that your positive beliefs about God would not withstand scrutiny. Why else protect them so delicately from alternative viewpoints? An undergraduate comes to mind who wanted to own his faith for himself by seeing how it could acquit itself in a diverse arena. But he wanted even more to remain loyal to God as he understood loyalty, among other things by avoiding negative beliefs or openness to them. For this reason (and with his parents' encouragement) he attended a small religious college instead of the large secular university that he would have preferred. This stifling of exploration nourished a growing suspicion that the positive beliefs he grew up with might be defective. He became increasingly open to negative beliefs about God and wound up, alternatively doubting God's existence or power.

So there are at least two ways in which declining to engage in religious disagreement could set in motion a course of events in which the believer forms, or becomes open to forming, negative beliefs about God – and thus, by the Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim, conducting herself disloyally.

The objector might contend that, should these two consequences arise, the negative beliefs (or openness to them) will not often count as disloyal, on the grounds that the all-else-equal claim applies. Often, the believer will be unable to help it (excusing her on the strong version of the doxastic-partiality view), or doing otherwise would violate epistemic norms, since in both scenarios above she has evidence for negative beliefs (excusing her on the epistemological version). If this is so, then declining to engage in religious disagreement does *not* pose a substantial risk of disloyalty.

But this objection does not significantly help the believer who declines religious disagreement. On the question of doxastic voluntarism, the believers in both scenarios could do more to avoid these negative doxastic changes. They might for instance engage in religious disagreement in the hopes that this yields evidence supporting their positive beliefs. On the question of epistemic norms, on the permissive epistemology espoused by the objector, it is not a foregone conclusion that these will mandate negative beliefs; but even if they do, the believer here too could simply seek additional evidence. So the “all-else-equal” proviso does not particularly help the believer who incurs these consequences avoid the charge of disloyalty.

The first two possible consequences of declining religious disagreement are disloyal by the objector’s lights, but not necessarily by mine (more in section 6). In contrast, the third and fourth possible consequences are disloyal by my lights. I assume that they are by the objector’s too, even though, as we’ll see, they involve *maintaining* one’s positive beliefs about God. They are particularly apt to arise for intellectually and emotionally vibrant believers who are passionate to learn about God or to own their faith for themselves.

To see these possible consequences, note that, if a person motivated in this way has a desire to engage in religious disagreement, but also has a competing desire to be loyal to God on the grounds that disagreement is supposedly disloyal, he will experience a cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonances are unpleasant (Festinger 1957), in cases even terrifying (Solomon, Greener, and Pyszczynski 1991). They strongly dispose our minds to resolve them in favor of one of the conflicting attitudes. Consider, then, a believer who resolves the present dissonance in favor of his desire to be loyal as he understands loyalty. What happens to his desire to engage in religious disagreement – or rather to the passion to learn about God or own his faith that gives rise to this desire?

One possibility is that this passion exits his religious life entirely: he suppresses it or re-directs it toward non-religious interests, such as a relationship or career. Religious apathy is thus the third potential disloyal consequence of declining religious disagreement. Although this person keeps his positive beliefs in theory, his religious passion fades and with it his emotional attitude of association with God. And his religious actions (such as prayer) dwindle entirely or become a matter of rote. If push came to shove he would be indisposed to stick up for God or for his positive beliefs.

The other possibility for the passionate believer – the fourth potential disloyal consequence of declining religious disagreement – is dogmatic belief. The believer in this case *keeps* her religious passion. But instead of investing it in exploratory discourse as she originally wanted to, she invests it in avoiding and even demonizes other viewpoints. That is, she swings toward holding her religious beliefs with strong confidence, and unwaveringly. She either buttresses them with a dogmatic epistemology, or scorns epistemology altogether.

One might think that dogmatic positive belief about God is eminently loyal – it can certainly be motivated by a strong emotional association with him, and seems undeniably to side with him. But in fact it courts serious disloyalty. To see why, note that maintaining

dogmatic belief requires rigid cognitive categories that resist change. Our standard means of processing new information is to bring it into something like a reflective equilibrium between with our pre-existing cognitive categories. Our categories filter the information, but are standardly no so rigid that it cannot alter them. (Enough information will eventually bring most of us to believe something that we would prefer to remain in denial about.) Not so for the dogmatic believer. Her cognitive categories remain fixed, warping the information she takes in. The result is belief that is apt to be one-sided and simplistic. Such a believer is apt to oversimplify some things and completely misunderstand others.<sup>16</sup>

These oversimplifications and misunderstandings put a dogmatic believer in danger, despite her best intentions, of behaving disloyally. Even though she is motivated by a strong emotional association with God, her actions will often side against him: they will run counter to his will, character, or values. Consider religious believers who promote immoral political, social, or allegedly ethical ends in the tragic name of religious loyalty: aligning with extremist politicians, conducting inquisitions, or oppressing minorities. Or consider Job's companions, who insist that Job must have done something to deserve the massive suffering of losing his children, his possessions, his health, and his assurance of God's love. Their dogmatic beliefs about how God's goodness and justice work cannot accommodate the evident fact of Job's innocence. Due to their cognitive inflexibility, they badly misjudge not only Job's situation, but God himself, who rebukes them on the grounds that they have "not spoken of me what is right" (42:7).

One might object that such behavior is not disloyalty, but rather a problematic form of loyalty – after all, such believers are doing what they think God wants. But recall that loyal conduct amounts to siding with God, not just doing what you mistakenly think sides with God. Conduct that, however motivated, dishonors God and utterly contravenes his values and character sides against him.

We have seen four ways in which declining to engage in religious disagreement, even if you are motivated by an emotional association with God, risks disloyalty, and does so (I suggest) substantially. The first, coming to think poorly of God, and the second, suspecting that your positive beliefs will not withstand scrutiny, are disloyal only by the objector's lights, because they involve negative beliefs about God (or an openness to forming them). They are less likely in any given case to be disloyal by my lights, since I will argue that negative beliefs and openness to forming them are not disloyal as such. The third and fourth possible consequences, keeping your positive beliefs but becoming either apathetic or dogmatic, are disloyal by my lights as well as (presumably) the objector's.

So declining religious disagreement, no less than engaging in it, runs a substantial risk of setting in motion a course of events in which you conduct yourself disloyally. If an action's running such a risk is enough to make it disloyal, then declining religious disagreement, no less than engaging in it, is disloyal. But I take it that this damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't result is absurd. If this is so, then premise 2 (the Substantiality Claim) is false. Merely running a substantial risk of disloyalty is not as such disloyal.

Another way to see this is to construct a parallel argument that both alternative actions, engaging in religious disagreement or declining it, are typically *loyal*. After all, both can be motivated by an emotional association with God, and both have a substantial probability of

---

<sup>16</sup> This is so even if her "core" religious beliefs, for example in such-and-such a religious creed, happen to be true (Dormandy 2020b). For core religious beliefs are held in a complex network of auxiliary beliefs, including about how the core beliefs themselves are to be interpreted, what counts as evidence for or against the core beliefs (or a given interpretation), and what the core beliefs (interpreted in a given way) imply about social or ethical matters.



setting in motion a course of events in which you conduct yourself *loyally*. Engaging in religious disagreement can help the believer better know God and live out his values, or own her faith for herself. Declining religious disagreement can help the believer maintain her positive beliefs about God and thus, dogmatic belief notwithstanding, be motivated to continue living out God's values. Our two alternative actions, because of the loyal consequences they may bring about, thus seem to have an equal right to be called *loyal*.

Of course, there are surely cases in which running a substantial risk of conducting yourself disloyally is itself disloyal. And some surely involve engaging in religious disagreement, whereas others surely involve declining it. But which is the case depends on other factors, such as the psychology of the believer in question, and which alternative actions are available to her. These are matters for case-by-case assessment. Premise 2, the Substantiality Claim, is thus false, and the Argument from Risk is unsound. The most that this argument can establish is that it is *sometimes* disloyal to engage in religious disagreement – just like it is likely to sometimes be disloyal to decline to.

I will now argue that the scope of this “sometimes” is much smaller than the objector thinks. Many of the supposedly disloyal consequences of engaging in disagreement, I will argue, are not disloyal after all. In particular, I will argue that it is not disloyal, at least not as such, to form or be open to forming negative beliefs about God.

## 6. The Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim is False

In both arguments we have considered, the Explanation Argument and the Argument from Risk, the Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim does heavy lifting. I will now argue that this claim is false. I will start by showing that it is false for relationships of loyalty between human beings, and will then apply those considerations to relationships of loyalty with God.

### 6.1 Self-Gaslighting

Suppose that Odysseus is loyal to Calypso, yet Calypso emotionally abuses him. Supposing the Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim is true, then Odysseus has a problem. If he is to know that Calypso is abusive, he must do something that is by his lights disloyal: form a negative belief about her. To the extent that Odysseus is loyal, he will do his best to avoid this. He may avoid negative evidence, or if he notices it, he may explain it away or frame it more positively (“She’s having a bad day”, “She’s just enthusiastic about doing things right”, or “It was my fault”). This will not always be a conscious matter of choosing one interpretation over another – it will often be a cognitive habit embedded in emotions and volitions. If successful, Odysseus will not believe, or even be disposed to believe, that Calypso is abusive. The Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim recommends cultivating a tendency to overlook problems in a relationship of loyalty, even serious ones. I’ll call this the *self-gaslighting problem*.

This problem suffices to reject the Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim. Self-gaslighting perverts what loyalty is all about. Relationships of loyalty provide a context for exchanging and enjoying certain interpersonal goods. They enable the loyal person to receive such things as safety, protection, and a sense of meaning arising from the association with the other party. The object of loyalty for her part receives such things as appreciation, service, or ascriptions of status. The norms of loyalty foster the appropriate transfer of these goods. Self-gaslighting, in contrast, makes you vulnerable to harm. Far from being normative for relationships of loyalty, doxastic partiality – because it promotes self-gaslighting – contravenes these norms.

The doxastic partialist might respond by appealing to the “all else equal” clause in the Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim. Recall that, on both the strong and the epistemological versions of the doxastic-partiality view, this clause exempts you from the charge of disloyalty when you are *psychologically compelled* to believe (or become open to believing) negatively. And recall that, on the epistemological version of the view, you are also exempt when you are *epistemically required* to do so. Surely Calypso’s behavior compels Odysseus psychologically to form (or at least be open to forming) negative beliefs about her; and there is surely enough evidence to require him epistemically to do so. The partialist concludes that the Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim can exempt Odysseus from the charge of disloyalty toward Calypso on both of these grounds.

But this response does not work. First, Odysseus is not psychologically compelled to believe (or become open to believing) anything negative about Calypso. On the contrary, because he has loyally cultivated positive belief-forming habits up till now, it is psychologically difficult for him to *not* form (or be disposed toward) positive beliefs about her. The all-else-equal clause that would exempt Odysseus on grounds of doxastic involuntarism never has a chance to kick in.

Second, would epistemic norms exempt Odysseus from the requirement to believe positively of Calypso? If the epistemic norms are internalist, they would not. Why? Because Odysseus will have done his best to believe well of her all along, so his total evidence is apt to strongly support a low probability for negative beliefs, and his long-cultivated belief-forming habits will not easily change his subjective probability distribution. Against this skewed evidential and dispositional backdrop, internalist epistemic norms are not apt to mandate negative belief about Calypso. On the contrary, his misleading evidence is apt to make it reasonable for Odysseus to continue to give her the benefit of the doubt.

The doxastic partialist (at least, of the epistemological persuasion) will fare better with externalist epistemic norms. These are more likely to mandate negative belief for Odysseus, and so exempt him from the requirement to believe positively about Calypso. For such norms would require him to believe in ways that are reliable, and so would be much less forgiving of Odysseus’s misleading (internalist) evidence and experiences. Externalist epistemic norms, then, would more likely deliver what the doxastic partialist needs: an exemption for Odysseus from believing positively about Calypso.

In summary, the partialist’s appeal to the all-else-equal clause does not work for the strong version of the doxastic-partiality view, which exempts only for psychological compulsion; nor does it work for the epistemological version, as long as the epistemic norms in question are internalist. The only form of the view on which Odysseus might be exempt from positive belief (or dispositions to believe) is an epistemological version positing externalist epistemic norms.

But this exemption does not accomplish much. Even if this version of the partiality view exempts Odysseus in an externalist sense, there is an internalist sense in which he is *not* exempted. Recall that, in Odysseus’s skewed doxastic state, recognizing the truth about Calypso’s abusive behavior is psychologically difficult, given his loyally cultivated perceptual dispositions and evidence to date. This means that he will be hard-pressed to *recognize* that externalist epistemic norms exempt him from believing positively, because he will be hard-pressed to recognize that his belief-formation vis-à-vis Calypso has been unreliable. (It would have to be a great and serendipitous shock that aligns his perspective with reality.) This means that Odysseus will still *think* that his loyalty mandates positive belief and belief-forming dispositions. So forming or opening himself up to negative beliefs, even if epistemic norms mandate this, *would amount, by his lights, to disloyal conduct*. Even if there is no

longer an externalist sense of “ought” on which he ought to believe positively, there is still an internalist one – doing what is loyal from his own perspective. After all, we would rightly think less of his loyalty (at least if we accept the Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim) if he were to decide do what he thinks violates an important norm of loyalty.

The self-gaslighting problem is thus alive and well, and we can now see that it has two facets. First, obedience to partialist norms of belief will make it psychologically difficult to realize that negative things are true of the object of your loyalty. Second, loyalty itself places internal normative restrictions on any efforts you may make to discover this.

We are in a position to understand the shortcomings of another response that the doxastic partialist might make. This response reminds us that the normative expectation to conduct yourself loyally can itself be cancelled – namely, if the object of loyalty has a negative enough characteristic, such as a tendency to emotionally abuse. Calypso’s conduct thus itself absolves Odysseus of any loyalty-based expectation to believe positively about her. But once more, this exemption is of little help. Odysseus will not easily become aware that his relationship with Calypso no longer counts as one of loyalty, because his perspective is stuck where it is – and as long as this is so, he will violate the norms of loyalty by his own lights.

I take self-gaslighting to be an unacceptable consequence of an account of loyalty and disloyalty. Because they follow from the Doxastic-Disloyalty Claim, I take this claim to be false. Forming or being open to forming a negative belief about someone with whom you are in a relationship of loyalty is not, as such, disloyal.

## 6.2 Epistemically Oriented Loyalty to God

So loyalty does not come with a prescription that mandates doxastic partiality. But from this it does not follow that a modicum of partial belief is not *good*, even if its goodness can be overridden by other factors. The doxastic partialist may still claim that, in a relationship of loyalty, negative belief or openness to forming negative beliefs can still be bad, all else equal, even if it is not outright disloyal. But I will argue that this milder claim is false too.

I will defend an alternative picture entirely, on which loyalty involves a concern to know what is *true* of the other party, whether positive or negative. We may call this *epistemically oriented loyalty*. A person exhibiting this sort of loyalty abides by truth-conducive epistemic norms when it comes to forming beliefs about the other party. This stands in contrast to partialist loyalty, which (as we saw) involves a concern to believe positively, even if this means violating epistemic norms or at least believing as permissively as they allow. Epistemically oriented loyalty, I contend, is superior to doxastically partial loyalty. This holds too of loyalty to God.

One reason is that epistemically oriented loyalty is more honoring to the other party (Kawall 2013, 359-360). Why? Consider that the person who exhibits partialist loyalty would hold positive beliefs even if the object of loyalty had not merited them. Far from being a compliment, this has something in common with flattery. It is more honoring to be believed great in a way that is sensitive to your demonstrated greatness, so that you might not be believed great otherwise. This holds no less for a perfect God, who is portrayed at least in Jewish and Christian scriptures as keen to list the excellent things that he has done for his people over their history, so that they have faith in him on that basis.

A second reason why epistemically oriented loyalty is superior to partialist loyalty is that the latter, as we have seen, risks promoting certain sorts of misunderstanding about the other party. Self-gaslighting is one example; and even the idea that doxastic partiality is good

(as opposed to required) risks promoting misunderstanding. This is not only damaging to you, it does a disservice to the object of loyalty, since in failing to hold her to account, you enable her in persisting as she is. Epistemically oriented loyalty, in contrast, puts you in a better position to perceive negative characteristics and thus to respond constructively (Kawall 2013, 354; Arpaly and Brinkerhoff 2018, 43). Supposing a negative belief about the other party is true, forming (and communicating) it can help her see her own behavior for what it is, perhaps for the first time. This may promote self-reflection, the decision to ask for forgiveness, and further steps toward becoming a better person – things that a loyal person should want for those to whom she is loyal. Forming a negative belief in this spirit can be a way of siding with her: helping her be a better version of herself.

This holds for God. For example, the Jewish Scriptures or Old Testament portrays people who have special relationships with God, such as Moses or Abraham, talking him down from performing destructive actions. And think of Job, who honestly and openly accused God of injustice, while continuing to hold up a picture of the just God whom he had always taken himself to worship. Whether or not these passages portray God negatively (an interpretive question that I will not address here), it is striking that these believers do not sycophantically agree that God's actions or intentions are right simply because they are God's. In criticizing God for the sake of what they think is right (indeed what they think is more God-like), they seem to exhibit an epistemically oriented loyalty.

One might think that misunderstanding or mistaken positive beliefs are less of a problem for doxastic partiality when we assume a perfect God, for in this case there are no negative characteristics to come to know about. But the worry applies even with a perfect God. We saw in section 5.1 that doxastic partiality can give rise to dogmatic thought patterns that might prevent a believer from recognizing aspects of God's greatness that do not fit neatly in simplistic categories. We saw the example of Job's companions, and of people who, because of dogmatic misunderstanding, mistakenly pursue harmful projects in God's name. The cognitive flexibility and subtlety promoted by an epistemically oriented loyalty, in contrast, can open one up to new, surprising, discoveries about God – who, especially if he is perfect, has positive characteristics that explode our categories anyway. The dogmatism of Job's companions did not win them a mind-blowing religious experience; Job's epistemically oriented insistence on holding God to account did.

The doxastic partialist may push back. Epistemic norms are often truth-conducive. But evidence can be misleading, and in a relationship of loyalty, a false negative belief is a grave mistake. Imagine believing that your friend is abusing a third party, when it turns out that this is false. Surely a modicum of doxastic partiality, in spite of its other disadvantages, is crucial for avoiding a situation like this. This all the more so in the case of a perfect (or even very good) God. After all, the objector will note, our fallen world contains ample negative evidence about God – against his existence, goodness, and justice. In light of this, the person exhibiting partialist loyalty is more likely to believe truly about him, minor misunderstandings notwithstanding, whereas the person of epistemically oriented loyalty will follow her misleading evidence to form *false* negative beliefs. This means that her belief will slander God – and slandering someone you mean to side with is the ultimate disloyalty.

I have two responses. First, we may agree that negative beliefs about those toward whom we are loyal should not, in general, be formed facily. But the reason is not the bare fact that they are negative. It is rather that, in general, we will usually have seen the better sides of those toward whom we are loyal. This backdrop of positive evidence is apt to make negative beliefs improbable, and to supply ready charitable explanations for negative

evidence.<sup>17</sup> But when the evidence is so negative as to overwhelm this background evidence, or there is little background evidence to go on, or when the negative belief supported by the evidence is grave (for example risking bad consequences for third parties), a healthy relationship of loyalty can surely withstand an honest mistake, which is different from slander. This holds all the more if the object of loyalty is a morally perfect or even very good God.

Second, we have said much about what *loyalty* involves, but less about what it takes to be a good *object* of loyalty. And surely a good, indeed deserving, object of loyalty would prefer responsibility to your evidence over obsequious positive belief no matter what. Looking at it this way, for a loyal person to prioritize positive belief over his evidence carries the implicature that the object of loyalty prefers things this way round. And such an implicature, I suggest, dishonors the object of loyalty too. A good object of loyalty should see this, all the more so if he is a perfect or even very good God.

I conclude that epistemically oriented loyalty, including toward God, is superior to doxastically partial loyalty.

### *6.3 Responses to the Arguments for Doxastic Partiality*

We are now in a position to respond to the four arguments for doxastic partiality. The first said that believing partially about the objects of our loyalty is analogous to treating them partially (Hazlett 2013). But the analogy between beliefs and actions does not work. We have seen that you can better give the other party what she needs if you know about her as she is. In order to treat her partially in a way that will really benefit her, your beliefs must not be partial, but epistemically oriented.

A similar point applies to the second argument. This argument says that relationships of loyalty give rise to normative expectations to commit to the object of our loyalty, including to the goodness of his character (Stroud 2006). But I have argued that if you commit to the person's good character, your commitment to *him* may be compromised.

The third argument concerned the supposed phenomenology of relationships of loyalty (Stroud 2006; Keller 2004). First, we supposedly feel an impulse to believe well of those to whom we are loyal. I agree that we do, but this is not a guide to the norms of loyalty. I have argued that we can better side with someone by striving to know them as they are. Second, we supposedly want those who are loyal to us to believe well of us and be closed to believing badly. I suggest that a healthier way to channel this impulse in a relationship of loyalty is to strive to be the kind of person about whom an epistemically oriented friend could easily believe well.

Finally, the extrinsic argument: that believing positively will strengthen your relationship with the other party, whereas believing negatively will risk weakening it (Stroud 2006). In the religious case this amounts to a strengthening or weakening of faith in God. In response, we have seen that partialist positive belief in God comes with risks of its own, and that epistemically oriented negative belief can be a way of holding God to his own standards, or owning your faith for yourself, and thus siding with him more fully.

### *6.4 Epistemically Oriented Loyalty and Religious Disagreement*

---

<sup>17</sup> And perhaps there is a high contextual threshold for forming negative beliefs on the basis of negative evidence.

We have established that epistemically oriented religious disagreement can be loyal even by the lights of the doxastic-partiality view. Because we then established that this view is false, new avenues for loyal religious disagreement open. It can be loyal even if it involves negative beliefs about God or an openness to forming them – indeed even because of this. Job is our lode star: his epistemically oriented religious disagreement was with God himself – who took Job seriously enough to respond at length.<sup>18</sup>

For another example, recall the undergraduate (section 5.1) who wanted to own his faith for himself by attending a diverse secular university, but wound up at an insular religious college out of concern to do what he (and his parents) took to be loyal to God. I suggest that attending the secular university, and engaging there in religious disagreement (among other things), could have been eminently loyal. And it could have been loyal *precisely because* he would have allowed himself to be open to negative beliefs about God. This is just what he needed to take his faith to the next level. Of course he would have run the risk of weakening or losing it, but this is a risk that he needed to run – precisely because he wanted to maintain and strengthen his emotional attitude of association with God, and continue siding with God all the more decisively thereafter.

## 7. Conclusion

I have defended epistemically oriented religious disagreement against the worry that it is disloyal. Or at least, against the worry it is disloyal in virtue of involving negative beliefs about God or an openness to forming some. Even assuming that such a doxastic state is disloyal, my response to the Explanation Argument established that there are equally plausible reasons why a believer would engage in religious disagreement. My response to the Argument from Risk established that engaging in disagreement does not risk greater disloyalty than declining to engage in it. Doxastic partialists need not fear religious disagreement.

But nor need we – or should we – be doxastic partialists at all. I have also established that negative beliefs about God (or openness to forming some) is not as such disloyal. This enables us to expand my responses to the Explanation Argument and the Argument from Risk. Negative beliefs (or openness to them) can be a perfectly acceptable explanation for a loyal believer’s engaging in religious disagreement. And the fact that religious disagreement runs a substantial risk of such a doxastic state is not a problem from the viewpoint of loyalty after all. On the contrary, the best form of loyalty is epistemically oriented: it involves a concern to know the other party as she is, and expresses itself by the assiduous following of truth-conducive epistemic norms.

And one way to express this form of loyalty can be to engage in epistemically oriented religious disagreement. This is *not* an extraneous addition for believers who simply refuse to make do with the beliefs that they have been given, nor is it a cheeky or flippant rejection of God’s graciously revealed truths. It is an epistemically virtuous way to keep yourself and your religious community from the epistemic traps of insularity and groupthink. And it is a way of acknowledging, compatibly with commitment to God and the revelation as your community has received it, God’s sovereign freedom to surprise us yet.

In our polarized age, the idea of respectful, open-minded, and epistemically oriented disagreement on matters of ultimate importance may seem out of touch or naïve. But this is

---

<sup>18</sup> However we interpret what God *said*, it cannot be denied that he took Job seriously.

yet another reason, beyond the epistemic benefits that it can confer, why it is more important than ever.<sup>19</sup>

## References

- Anderson, Elizabeth. 1995. "Knowledge, Human Interests, and Objectivity in Feminist Epistemology." *Philosophical Topics* 23 (2): 27–58.
- Arpaly, Nomy, and Anna Brinkerhoff. 2018. "Why Epistemic Partiality Is Overrated." *Philosophical Topics* 46 (1): 37–51. <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics20184613>.
- Benton, Matthew A. 2018a. "Pragmatic Encroachment and Theistic Knowledge." In *Knowledge, Belief, and God*, 267–87. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Benton, Matthew A. 2018b. "God and Interpersonal Knowledge." *Res Philosophica* 95 (3): 421–47.
- Buchak, Lara. 2012. "Can It Be Rational to Have Faith?" In *Probability in the Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Jake Chandler and Victoria Harrison. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crawford, Lindsay. 2019. "Believing the Best: On Doxastic Partiality in Friendship." *Synthese* 196 (4): 1575–93. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-017-1521-x>.
- Cruz, Helen De, and Johan De Smedt. 2013. "The Value of Epistemic Disagreement in Scientific Practice: The Case of Homo Floresiensis." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science, Part A* 44: 169–77.
- Dormandy, Katherine. 2018a. "Disagreement from the Religious Margins." *Res Philosophica* 95 (3): 371–95.
- . 2018b. "Does Epistemic Humility Threaten Religious Beliefs?" *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 46 (4): 292–304. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091647118807186>.
- . 2018c. "Evidence-Seeking as an Expression of Faith." *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 92 (3): 409–28. <https://doi.org/10.5840/acpq2018514154>.
- . 2020a. "'In Abundance of Counsellors There Is Victory': Reasoning about Public Policy from a Religious Worldview." In *Religious Truth and Identity in an Age of Plurality*, edited by Oliver Wiertz and Peter Jonkers, 162–81. London: Routledge.
- . 2020b. "The Epistemic Benefits of Religious Disagreement." *Religious Studies* 56 (390–408). <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0034412518000847>.
- Festinger, Leon. 1957. *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Evanston, IL: Row Peterson.
- Hawley, Katherine. 2014. "Partiality and Prejudice in Trusting." *Synthese* 191: 2029–45. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-012-0129-4>.
- Hazlett, Allan. 2013. *A Luxury of the Understanding*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hazon, Yoram. 2012. *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- James, William. 1921. *The Will to Believe, Human Immortality, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. Longmans, Green, and Co.
- Kawall, Jason. 2013. "Friendship and Epistemic Norms." *Philosophical Studies* 165 (2): 349–70. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-012-9953-0>.
- Keller, Simon. 2004. "Friendship and Belief." *Philosophical Papers* 33 (3): 329–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/05568640409485146>.
- . 2007. *The Limits of Loyalty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511487590.002>.
- Kelly, Thomas. 2014. "Evidence Can Be Permissive 1." In *Contemporary Debates in*

---

<sup>19</sup> Many thanks to Matt Benton and Jon Kvanvig for valuable comments.

- Epistemology*, edited by Matthias Steup, John Turri, and Ernest Sosa, 298–311. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Kierkegaard, Soren. 1983. "Fear and Trembling." In *Fear and Trembling / Repetition*, edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 1–124. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kvanvig, Jonathan L. 2018. *Faith and Humility*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Longino, Helen. 1990. *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mugg, Joshua. 2016. "In Defense of the Belief-Plus Model of Propositional Faith." *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 8: 201–19.
- Plantinga, Alvin. 2000a. "Pluralism: A Defense of Exclusivism." In *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, edited by Kevin Meeker and Philip L. Quinn, 172–92. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2000b. *Warranted Christian Belief*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Potter, R. Dennis. 2000. "Finitism and the Problem of Evil." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33 (4): 83–95.
- Solomon, Sheldon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski. 1991. "A Terror Management Theory of Social Behavior: The Psychological Functions of Self-Esteem and Cultural Worldviews." *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 24: 93–157.
- Stroud, Sarah. 2006. "Epistemic Partiality in Friendship." *Ethics* 116 (3): 498–524. <https://doi.org/10.1086/500337>.
- Wettstein, Howard. 2012. *The Significance of Religious Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.