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1

Disagreement, Opinion and Expertise

► **Abstract:** *One fundamental fact about religion is that religious disagreement is more or less ubiquitous. After considering a range of possible responses to the facts of religious disagreement – irreligion, pluralism, exclusivism – we consider some more unsettling questions that are raised to us by our disagreement with those who are at least as smart, well-informed, reflective and attentive as we are when it comes to questions about religion. We argue that it is unreasonable to expect convergence of expert opinions when it comes to the characteristic claims of major worldviews.*

Keywords: disagreement; doxastic peer; doxastic superior; expert consensus; intellectual arrogance; opinion; religious pluralism

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The great world religions – including Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – have very different teachings about divinity, salvation, ultimate Reality, ultimate value, the meaning and purpose of human life, and much else besides. Moreover, within each of the great world religions, there are countless branches and sects that have different – and often very different – teachings about these things. But it is not just that these teachings are different: in many cases, these teachings directly contradict one another. And these contradictions or disagreements in religious teachings – both within and across the great world religions – are no secret: everybody knows that Hindus and Buddhists and Jains and Jews and Christians and Muslims and Taoists disagree with one another about divinity, salvation, ultimate Reality, ultimate value, the meaning and purpose of human life, and much else besides.

But where there is disagreement, there is error: if two parties disagree on a particular matter, then it cannot be that they are both *completely* right about it. So it cannot be that each version of Hinduism is completely right, and each version of Buddhism is completely right, and each version of Judaism is completely right, and each version of Confucianism is completely right, and each version of Christianity is completely right, and each version of Islam is completely right; it must be that most – or perhaps even all – of these versions of the religions are at least partly mistaken about divinity, salvation, ultimate Reality, ultimate value, the meaning and purpose of human life, and so on.

The facts about religious disagreement have seemed to some to be grounds for *irreligion*. Given that all of the major world religions cannot be completely right – and, indeed, more strongly, given that no more than one of the major world religions is completely right – perhaps we do best to suppose that none of the major world religions is completely right. But, if a major world religion is not completely right, then it is more or less completely wrong: it can't be only partly right that Jesus is the Saviour of the World; and it can't be only partly right that there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his Prophet; and it can't be only partly right that suffering will cease if, and only if, all desire ceases; and it can't be only partly right that moksha can only be achieved after many lifetimes of striving; and it can't be only partly right that misogi is required to restore natural purity; and it can't be only partly right that God forbids consumption of non-kosher food; and it can't be only partly right that the sole goal is to live in harmony with Tao; and it can't be

only partly right that the jiva can only save itself by discovering its own perfect and unchanging nature. But if all of the major world religions are more or less completely wrong, then surely the right response is to give up on the major world religions.

In response to the facts of religious disagreement, *religious pluralists* say that the observed disagreement is merely superficial: at a more fundamental level, all religions have the same content, and teach the same things. John Hick (1922–2011) – perhaps the best-known proponent of religious pluralism – argues that all of the world’s religions promote transformational processes that lead the faithful away from self-centredness and towards an ultimate Reality whose nature transcends the conceptions of those religions. According to Hick, ultimate Reality is *ineffable* – it escapes any positive characterization in human thought and language – yet salvation, or liberation, or human fulfilment depends upon experience of, and relationship to, ultimate Reality.

The claim that ultimate Reality is ineffable is mirrored by claims found in many of the major world religions. So, for example, within the Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – there are mystical traditions which insist that there is nothing positive that can be said about God: we can only say what God is not; we cannot say what God is. From the standpoint of given religious traditions, claims about the ineffability of ultimate Reality are both suitable expressions of awe, mystery, and transcendence, and potential defeaters for certain kinds of critical attack. But, within given religious traditions, claims about the ineffability of ultimate Reality are always combined with detailed claims about what ultimate Reality requires of human beings, and, in particular, of those who belong to the religious traditions in question.

Hick’s religious pluralism stands in an uneasy relationship with the world’s major religious traditions. On the one hand, according to Hick, the detailed claims about what right relation to ultimate Reality requires of those who belong to given religious traditions are *all* false: right relation to ultimate Reality does *not* require subscription to the five pillars of Islam, or following of the Buddhist eightfold way, or adherence to Hindu rules regarding purity and marriage, or keeping of the Jewish Sabbath, or undergoing Christian baptism, and so on. On the other hand, according to Hick, right relation to ultimate Reality does depend upon subscription to *one or other* of the world’s major religious traditions: one only attains salvation, or liberation, or human fulfilment by way of experience

of, and relationship to, ultimate Reality that is mediated by *one or other* of the world's major religious traditions.

Religious pluralism looks unattractive from the standpoint of many who belong to one or other of the world's major religious traditions. Most adherents of a particular religious tradition do suppose that the detailed claims about what right relation to ultimate Reality requires of them are true; they would not be adherents of a particular religious tradition unless they thought that the requirements of that particular religious tradition are requirements that derive directly from the nature of ultimate Reality. Religious pluralism also looks unattractive from the standpoint of many who do not belong to one or other of the world's major religious traditions. What reason is there to suppose that right relation to ultimate Reality depends upon subscription to *one or other* of the world's major religious traditions? Even if we accept that our ultimate goal is or should be the overcoming of self-centredness, why should anyone suppose that we need *religion* in order to achieve that goal? And how does the supposition that there is an *ineffable* ultimate Reality establish grounds for thinking that our ultimate goal is, or should be, the overcoming of self-centredness?

The shortcomings of religious pluralism may well make us suspect that, if we accept that all of the major world religions are more or less completely wrong, then we shall end up rejecting religion altogether. The clear and obvious alternative, at least from the standpoint of religious believers, is to suppose that exactly one of the major world religions is more or less completely right. Of course, given that at most one of the major world religions is more or less completely right, most of the adherents of the major world religions will be mistaken in believing that *theirs* is the one true religion: but *each* will suppose that it is adherents of the *other* major world religions – and, of course, those who reject all of the major world religions – who are getting it more or less completely wrong.

Is there something uncomfortable about the view that you are getting things right and the vast majority of people are getting things wrong? It is sometimes suggested that it requires a certain kind of *intellectual arrogance* to believe that you are getting things right and the vast majority of people are getting things wrong. But, in circumstances in which there is a widespread diversity of opinion, holding any attitude at all will require you to have attitude that diverges from the attitudes of most others. Pretend that, as things now stand, there are 20 different positions on

religion, each adopted by 5% of the population – including 5% who never think about religion, 5% who have thought about religion but are entirely undecided, and 5% who are naturalists, and hence hold a positive worldview that is in conflict with all of the religious worldviews. Whatever you do – subscribe to a religious worldview, subscribe to an irreligious worldview, remain undecided between the full ranges of views, or refuse to think about the matter at all – you will be in a tiny minority. In this circumstance, you would be convicted of intellectual arrogance only if everyone else – no matter what they think – stands similarly convicted. Whatever might be wrong with holding a contested opinion, it surely cannot be that it is intellectually arrogant to hold such an opinion!

There may be more unsettling considerations that are raised by widespread disagreement. In particular, it is worth observing that, no matter what opinion you take on a widely contested question – from religion, or politics, or philosophy, or some similarly perennially contested domain – it is almost inevitable that there are smarter and better-informed people who have thought longer, harder and more seriously about the matter in question, and who disagree with you. Say that someone who is as smart and well-informed as you, and who has thought as long, as hard, and as seriously as you about a given domain is your (doxastic) *peer* with respect to that domain; and say that someone who is smarter and better informed than you, and who has thought longer, harder and more seriously about a given domain is your (doxastic) *superior*. The consideration before us is that, no matter what religious beliefs you hold, you have peers and superiors who disagree with the beliefs that you hold. What might you say in the face of this consideration?

Perhaps you might try denying that you have peers and superiors who disagree with you: anyone at least as smart and well-informed as you, and who has thought at least as long, hard, and seriously as you have about these matters accepts your religious beliefs. I think that this kind of denial is impossible to take seriously. If you are inclined to make such denial, then you really need to get out more: you need to expand your social and intellectual horizons.

Perhaps you might try saying that, in this unsatisfactory kind of situation, what ought to happen is that everyone has to converge on the correct opinion: if everyone holds the correct opinion, then there will be no disagreement between peers. Alas, this is entirely unhelpful. Of course, if everyone moves to the *same* opinion, then the holding of that opinion

will not be controversial. But peer disagreement is just a disagreement about which is the correct opinion, and, hence, about which is the view upon which the current spread of opinion should converge. It is obvious that, if everyone agrees with you, then no one disagrees with you – but that tells you nothing about how you should respond to the fact that peers and superiors do disagree with you!

Perhaps you might think that, since (almost) everyone is in the same boat, we are all free to ignore the fact that (almost) everyone has peers and superiors who hold divergent religious, and political, and philosophical beliefs. But that seems too hasty. If you've grown up in a community in which everyone shares a particular religious worldview, and you then discover that there are other communities with divergent worldviews, it seems reasonable to suppose that your confidence in your own religious worldview should be decreased. Finding out that you have peers and superiors who do not believe what you previously took to be universal beliefs surely ought to shake your confidence in the truth of those beliefs.

Most of us are not in the position that it is news to us that we have peers and superiors who disagree with our religious beliefs: most of us have (almost) always known that our religious beliefs are controversial. Should we, nonetheless, suppose that proper recognition of the controversial nature of those beliefs requires reduction in the confidence with which we currently hold them? Should we further suppose that, since everyone ought to be moved by similar considerations, there will actually be a process of convergence: perhaps to the opinion of the one who has thought longest, hardest, and most seriously about matters of religion; or perhaps to some distribution over the opinions of all of those who have thought longest, hardest, and most seriously about matters of religion; or perhaps to some other distribution over the opinion of all of those who have thought sufficiently long, sufficiently hard, and sufficiently seriously about matters of religion?

I suspect that these kinds of thought depend upon the application of a model of expert consensus that only has proper application in broadly scientific domains. For many subject matters, we do think that, if only we thought as long, as hard, and as seriously, as those who are experts in those domains, we would have arrived at the same opinions that those experts hold. I think that, if I had been sufficiently clever, and sufficiently well-informed, and if I had worked hard enough, I might have proved Wiles' theorem; I do not think that, if I had been sufficiently clever, and

sufficiently well-informed, and if I had worked hard enough, I might have *disproved* Wiles' theorem. But what goes for mathematics goes also for physics, chemistry, biology, geology, and a host of other disciplines: in these areas, expert opinion converges *because* expert opinion tends to track the truth. However, we simply do not think that religion – and philosophy, and politics – are similar to this: if there are experts in religion – and philosophy, and politics – we do not expect that we shall see convergence of their opinions.

Perhaps you might be inclined to say that it is an intellectual scandal that there is so little convergence of opinion in religion, and philosophy, and politics. Perhaps, more strongly, you might be inclined to think that, since there is so little convergence of 'opinion' in religion, and philosophy, and politics, it isn't really true that there is opinion in these domains. Maybe, as the logical positivists argued, the 'claims' of religion – and philosophy, and politics – are 'meaningless'. Maybe, as non-cognitivists say, the 'claims' of religion – and philosophy, and politics – are expressions of desires rather than expressions of beliefs. Maybe, as fictionalists say, the 'claims' of religion – and philosophy, and politics – are more or less deliberate fictions. Maybe... well, maybe you can think of other radical options that might be pursued at this point.

Can we hold onto the idea that we really do have opinions about religion – and philosophy, and politics – while rejecting the idea that, if there were expert opinion in these domains, then there would also be expert consensus? If we suppose that there is expert opinion about religion, should we find it surprising that there is no convergence in this expert opinion? Arguably not. Worldviews consist of large packages of beliefs that are deeply embedded in total networks of beliefs, tightly linked to a range of motivational states, and often accompanied by heavy emotional charges. People who do not share worldviews do not just differ on one or two beliefs; people who do not share worldviews typically differ on a wide range of beliefs, and the beliefs in question often have heavy motivational and emotional significance. Moreover, satisfying worldviews are quite different from one another: if we take a worldview and amend it by replacing a few of its contained beliefs with beliefs from a very different worldview, then the resulting worldview will almost always be much worse – much less believable – than either the initial worldview, or the worldview from which the replacement beliefs are drawn.

Worldviews contain large numbers of beliefs that swing together. Changing religious beliefs is not just a matter of making a small change

to a relatively isolated collection of beliefs. Moreover, surveying a system of religious beliefs is no easy matter: if I do not hold certain religious beliefs, then it is very hard for me to see what beliefs – and other attitudes – I should give up and take on were I to change my mind on those particular religious beliefs. While it is easy for me to see that just taking on those particular beliefs would definitely make my worldview worse, it is very hard for me to reach a perspective from which I can see that taking on a broader constellation of beliefs, including the particular beliefs in question, would plausibly lead to improvement upon the worldview that I currently have. And this point generalizes: any modification to my current worldview that I might make in response to the distribution of opinion on those particular religious questions amongst my peers and superiors will almost certainly make my worldview worse.

If we accept that worldviews and worldview beliefs do have the kind of significance that is being attributed to them, then perhaps we can see why we should not be too perturbed by the lack of convergence of expert opinion when it comes to worldview beliefs. True enough, there are practical – social, organizational – questions about the facilitation of ‘agreeing to disagree’; but, given the difficulties involved in surveying worldviews, the relatively ‘uncontrolled’ way in which worldviews develop, and the difficulties involved in changing worldviews, it is perhaps unsurprising – and no particular cause for concern – that long, hard, good, serious thought about worldview questions does not lead to convergence of opinion.

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