

## *The Relational and Doxastic Approach to Religious Diversity<sup>1</sup>*

DANIELE BERTINI

*University of Rome Tor Vergata, Rome, Italy*

*The main purpose of my paper is to work out an experiential notion of religious diversity. This means characterising religious diversity in terms of relational and doxastic features. Such a proposal differs from mainstream approaches to religious beliefs (at least from a philosophical viewpoint) because these handle the epistemic dimension of faith as a purely epistemic matter. On the contrary, my idea consists of highlighting how the epistemic evaluation of opposing religious propositions is the outcome of an interpersonal process of evidence sharing wherein the particularities of the involved individuals matter. In the introductory section, I will define the topic of my paper. In the subsequent one, I will characterise how the mainstream approach to religious diversity and my own contrast. In the third section, I will develop in a few details the main reasons for why the epistemic approach is unsatisfactory. In the fourth one, I will provide a thought experiment for religious diversity, and I will set forth my considerations about what the thought experiment shows, with a focus on issues about the epistemology of religious disagreements. I will conclude my paper with a brief overview of the main consequences of my proposal.*

**Keywords:** Religious diversity; epistemology of disagreement; conciliationism; steadfastness; analytic philosophy of religion.

### *1. Introduction*

The purpose of my paper is to raise several doubts about common assumptions framing the debate on religious diversity. According to the mainstream understanding of the notion, religious beliefs are to be addressed in terms of the ordinarily assumed epistemic intuitions that govern the epistemological evaluation of believing. This means that

<sup>1</sup> Dedicated to Ginevra Zoni, my May Queen. She gives me light, and for her I carry my fire.

dealing with religious beliefs involves the same conceptual analysis at work in any other domains of theoretical inquiry. My view is that such a project is questionable because religious beliefs are *sui generis* beliefs in reason of their irreducibility to a univocal meaning shared across different individuals engaging with them (Bertini 2020). As such, a bit of relational and doxastic features of religious beliefs, which are generated by the phenomenology of the assent to them, reveal relevance as much as purely epistemic characterisation (Bertini 2018).

Before entering in the argument, few statements on what the paper is concerned with and what is not. Religious diversity is a notion characterising a multiplicity of very different phenomena. From societal and historical viewpoints, distinct religious groups of believers adhering either to the same tradition or to alternative traditions may conflict and have social and institutional relationships due to their belonging either to the same context or competing ones. From a taxonomical viewpoint, religions that differ in core beliefs as they are expressed by the frame of narratives concerning religious referential targets give voice to different mindsets and cultural inheritances. From a content-of-faith viewpoint, beliefs addressing a religious object, ritual, or institutional device exhibit what individuals hold to be the case relating to their religious ideas.

Each of these domains of inquiry defines religious diversity in its terms and is concerned with specific domain-related questions. My efforts will be entirely devoted to saying something about the last of the domains mentioned above. There is no epistemic assumption of primacy towards philosophy or implicit hierarchical belief in my statement. Simply, as a philosopher of religion, I am interested in the truth of religious propositions. As a consequence, I am committed to theorising about what happens when individuals disagree over what they hold the truth of their beliefs is. Particularly, as an epistemologist of religious beliefs, I aim to provide the form that a rational answer to such disagreements should have. I do not believe that my task is of more importance nor more informative about religious diversity than those related to alternative approaches: it is indeed a matter of fact that relevant considerations from the three different domains which I distinguished above can be found within the theorisations developed by the use of the notion of religious diversity.

In what follows, I will refer to religious diversity as means to characterise the semantic issues relating to the divergent content of apparently incompatible beliefs, and I will not presume to have anything important to say about how religious diversity is drawn in other fields of inquiry addressing religions.

The peculiarity of my approach to religious diversity consists of characterisation of it in terms of relational and doxastic features. Such a proposal differs from mainstream approaches to religious beliefs (at least from a philosophical viewpoint) because these handle the epis-

temic dimension of faith as a purely epistemic matter. I assent to the trivial claim that the epistemic dimension of faith is an epistemic matter. However, I do not accept that it is purely such an affair: the relational and doxastic features of religious beliefs play an equally relevant role.

## *2. Relational and Doxastic vs. Purely Epistemic Approach to Religious Beliefs*

Let me begin with sketching the notions of *religious affiliation* and *belief justification* that prevail in mainstream literature. Such a clarification will help distinguish my own approach from rival ones.

Religious affiliation, first. Any tradition can be picked out by reason of a doctrinal system (Pouivet 2013). Such a system is constituted by a set of framework propositions that express a structured worldview. All adherents to a tradition assent to such a set of propositions (Alston 1992; Plantinga 1999; Harrison 2006; van Inwagen 2010). This implies that the religious beliefs of individuals adhering to opposing traditions may be dealt with by intuitions about the exclusivity of truth and other non exotic principles concerning how to think about the semantic incompatibility of beliefs. A notable consequence of this notion of religious affiliation is that any individuals adhering to a tradition may be represented as prototypical exemplars that stand for any other individual adhering to that very tradition. This being the case, from an epistemic viewpoint, all members of a doxastic group are interchangeable. This is exactly where the doxastic dimension of believing vanishes into the epistemic one. Suppose that all adherents to a tradition T give a literal assent to belief P. Real differences concerning how to understand the content of P are obscured by the alleged epistemic stability of the semantic value of P. That is, according to a purely epistemic approach whichever interpretation of P which is thought to be legitimate in T, has the same semantic value and represents the same content.

I will now move to the notion of justification of religious beliefs in the face of controversy. Having a religious belief consists of taking the content of the relevant proposition as true. As such, believers are justified if they have reasons in support of the truth of the proposition. Evidence works epistemically here: believers access a body of evidence containing *pro* and *contra* items to their belief, assess the weight of each element within the body of evidence to which they have access, and, finally, proportionate their evaluation of the truth of the proposition to evidence. Such evaluation of evidence is computational. According to the two main opposing parties in the epistemology of religious disagreement (i.e., the steadfast view and conciliationism), if (you hold that) your reasons are evidentially much stronger than those of your adversary, you do not have any epistemic obligation to revise your belief. Problems arise about whether the mere fact of peer disagree-

ment counts as contrary evidence, and how much weight such a mere fact should be given. While steadfast theorists think that, once certain epistemic requirements are met, there is no obligation to proportionate evidence in response to contrary beliefs (Gellman 2000; Bogardus 2013; Pittard 2014; Choo 2021), conciliationists hold that disagreements ask for such an obligation (Feldmann 2010). The relevant point is that common consensus in the epistemological literature makes little or no appeal to understanding adversary views when a disagreement is fully disclosed, namely, to having a first-person comprehension of why your adversary thinks their reasons are as good as yours.

According to the above assumptions, religious beliefs are ordinary beliefs concerning the doxastic field of religious ideas, and religious diversity is a relation between the doctrinal systems of different traditions. Any approach relying on similar stipulations about religious affiliation and justificatory processes for beliefs is merely epistemic because it assumes that religious propositions have a semantic content easy to grasp, are unambiguously shared across believers, and, at least in principle, are subject to ordinary manners of evaluation. Consequently, the evidential support relation between religious propositions and facts consists simply of listing which facts (would) make the proposition true: whoever is epistemically positioned in the right way (i.e. whoever accesses all the relevant pieces of information about the content of the proposition) reasons simply by assessing whether the content of the proposition correctly represents facts. Moreover, whoever is in a so happy epistemic position achieves the same conclusion as any other epistemic agent standing in the same epistemic position.

However, this approach to religious affiliation and justification of religious beliefs seems to be problematic from both empirical and normative viewpoints. First, traditions are (among other things) epistemic fields wherein a plurality of doxastic groups have relations of different kinds. Thinking about religions as homogeneous conceptual objects is unsupported by empirical evidence (Bertini 2019). Second, things do not change if the analysis focuses on the denominations of a tradition as objects of inquiry. Picking out a doxastic group is a matter of the fineness of analysis (call a *religious doxastic group* any group identified in terms of the acceptance of a set of seminal claims; Potter 2013; Bertini 2021). Denominations have internal diversity too (e.g., think about denominational divisions in the interpretation of Vedanta within Vedantin classical schools of philosophy). Third, several lively disagreements between denominations do not express normative disagreements relating to points of doctrine. For example, it is a common fact that people from different denominations may have the same fundamental beliefs. Consider the Christian debate concerning the Trinity: there are both Latin and Social Trinitarians within any Christian denominations. As a consequence, assenting to one or the other interpretation does not have any normative consequence for the religious affiliation to one or

the other denomination. Fourth, traditions are historical facts. Long-standing historical facts. Interpretive efforts of framework beliefs have accumulated an enormous quantity of reasons, arguments, and ideas in the passing of time: accordingly, no human being can have real access to full evidence (Bertini 2022). This seems to imply that any justificatory process seems mainly anecdotal, at least *prima facie*. By the notion of anecdoticity, I mean to characterise (in line with the common understanding of the term) that justification is based on personal reasoning and subjective experiences, random investigation, particular access to literature and case studies, and unsystematic appreciation of evidence.

My proposal consists of highlighting how the epistemic evaluation of opposing religious propositions is the outcome of an interpersonal process of evidence sharing wherein the particularities of the involved individuals matter. Each of these individuals has an anecdotal understanding of the content of their beliefs. It follows that their reaction to religious diversity basically depends on such anecdotal features. In my view, there is a plain conclusion to draw: religious diversity is not a (logical) relation between the doctrinal systems of different traditions (or denominations); rather, it is an (interpersonal) relation between individuals. Saying that religious diversity is a relational fact means to express that concrete individuals are engaged in a mutual process of epistemic comparison. Saying that it is a doxastic fact means to refer to the anecdotal nature of such a process. The point I'm making is not that the purely epistemic approach ignores tout court the particular epistemic situations of any two disagreeing individuals, of course. All the work made in the epistemology of disagreement literature concerns how to handle such epistemic situations and discriminate whether sound epistemic requirements are met to evaluate contrary evidence. Rather, my point is that such epistemic work on evidence comes after the construal of the meaning of the beliefs on which disagreements arise. Disagreements between beliefs are not given apriori in the opposition of verbal phrasing of the propositions involved. The interpersonal relation between individuals is the fact that originates the meaning of the disagreeing propositions. This is the main reason why my relational and doxastic approach to religious diversity contrasts the purely epistemic one. The epistemic approach brackets the relational and doxastic features of religious diversity and jumps to an idealized epistemic evaluation: comparing opposing propositions consists of assessing their semantic value according to the assumption that their literal phrasing explicitly expresses their content. Such evaluation is idealised because it stipulates that the content of belief can be captured from its propositional literal expression. On the contrary, my proposal argues for the claim that the required epistemic evaluation should be performed by starting from the relational and doxastic features of the relation.

### 3. *Issues with Aprioricity within the Purely Epistemic Approach*

Religious diversity is an endogenous phenomenon of religion. Any historical revelation is set forth within a context of competing religious worldviews. It is a common pattern of canonical texts to refer to the preaching of a doxastic leader, whose main concern is to defend their view in the face of alternative understandings of the divine. The existence of a plurality of traditions is always primitively assumed as a matter of fact. As such, religious diversity is a constitutive feature of religious belief and demands an epistemic answer (among other attitudes to the challenges that it poses).

From a sociological perspective, the contemporary way of experiencing religious diversity is qualified by the notion of secularity. Grossly speaking, the traditional embedding of religion in a state, which makes the pair with the unchallengeability of belief in the religious target of the institutionalised religion, has progressively eroded from inside during the last centuries, to the extent that the process left open the room for a plurality of competing beliefs (Taylor 2007). As a result, due also to the particular multicultural setting of modern societies, religious beliefs and unbeliefs are fragmented across the epistemic field within any doxastic context.

Such a situation has promoted the emergence of novel approaches to the study of religious diversity (Warner 1993, 2008; Woodhead 2009) which give up the traditional *church model* (i.e., religious experience is embodied into an institutionalised community at a national level of analysis) for a *congregational model* (i.e., religious experience is embodied in congregations mutually related within a religious marketplace): the qualifying feature of religious experience within nowadays societies is the constitutive enjoyment of relational frameworks, both from a theoretical and a practical viewpoint. The substantive consequence of such social facts is that individuals engage in personal ways to experience their religious commitments and life (Cipriani 2009).<sup>2</sup>

In order to provide conceptual distinctions useful to thinking epistemically about religious diversity, I will now introduce a tentative taxonomy for the varieties of the relation. Suppose adherents to different religious doxastic groups meet and debate over the truth of a proposition P. P is a seminal claim for one of the groups, but is denied by others. For example, P is the claim that there is only one divine entity that can be predicated of being God. In such a case, strict monotheists as Jews and Muslims disagree *prima facie* with Trinity monotheists like Christians or openly non-monotheists as Brahmanic Hindus (i.e., mainstream Hindus following Brahmanic traditions in rituals endorses-

<sup>2</sup> For reasons of space, I cannot discuss in more details these relevant issues. I addressed the issue of how to approach the sociological study of religion in a chapter-length discussion in Bertini (2016). Further, I provided an extensive discussion of how to account for what religions are in Bertini (2019).

ing the pluralistic pantheon of texts such as the Vedas). This provides an instance of *global epistemic* religious diversity. A further example of disagreement is the following (this is the *interdenominational* variety): let P be the claim that a transcendent awareness without content is the only existing reality, and has no proper parts. While Advaita Vedantins accept P, Vedantins adhering to the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta school deny it. Finally (here is the *intrad denominational epistemic* disagreement), P is the claim that the Trinity of God should be accounted for by starting from the notion of onefoldness. Latin Trinitarians and Social Trinitarians oppose by reason of their epistemic reactions to P.

Although scholars differently construe, categorise, and address religious diversity, there is a wide consensus that such diversity (whichever way it is understood) is an indisputable matter of fact (McKim 2012). Particularly, the consensus view seems to be that, even if you are sensitive to the fact that religious traditions cannot be reduced to their belief systems (e.g., denominational diversity in religion consists often in a difference in rituals and governmental institutions, the acceptance of the same set of seminal claims notwithstanding), the inner core of their diversity is always to be exemplified in terms of differing beliefs (independently of that they address epistemic or ritual and institutional matters).

Now, I do not question the assumption that beliefs are expressive of how religious individuals understand their faith. I accept that differences in things other than beliefs (e.g., rituals, historical contexts, governmental institutions), are at least conceptually represented by differences in beliefs. However, I have a few doubts that, when one is reasoning about religious disagreements, this suffices to state that different religious doxastic groups generate, develop, and endorse incommensurable religious worldviews.

My perplexities can be motivated by the following reasons:

A. The purely epistemic approach overestimates the relevance of global religious diversity in comparison to the other ones. As a consequence, it models interdenominational and intradenominational epistemic diversity on features of the global variety. This being the case, disagreements about couples of incompatible beliefs are understood as expressive of opposing viewpoints on basic matters. However, this is hardly the case in religious diversity. Often, individuals in such a relation disagree on local issues within a context of shared overlapping assumptions (e.g., most examples of interdenominational religious diversity can be traced back to this pattern). Further, beliefs stating different claims are in a lot of cases expressing different nuances of the same content (e.g., Jews, Christians, and Muslims characterise their God in opposing manners, nonetheless they all qualify as monotheists, and ground their faith on different interpretations of the same religious narratives). The moral is that people adhering to the same worldview (i.e., assenting to the same block of framework propositions for a



given domain of knowledge (Malcolm 2000)) may heavily disagree over grounding topics notwithstanding their shared assumptions of basic beliefs. As such, interdenominational epistemic diversity, for instance, is hardly a matter concerning incompatible worldviews (e.g., the evidence for this claim is that the victims of religious intolerance are often affiliated to the same religion as the persecutors).

B. The purely epistemic approach deals with what individuals believe in terms of their adherence to a religious doxastic group. A Jew is representative of Judaism, a Christian of Christianity, and so on. The concrete difference between individuals vanishes, and changes into a diversity of token and type: each individual adhering to a tradition is an ideal exemplar of a certain faith and differs from an individual adhering to another faith in reason of the difference of types of faith to which they adhere. Nonetheless, that co-religionists assume univocally the same set of seminal claims is controversial (Bertini 2020): the history of any religious tradition shows that religions are doxastic battlefields wherein debates never come to an end (e.g., theologians and scholars in doctrine usually disagree on a high number of seminal topics).

C. The purely epistemic approach tends to understand the meaning of a belief in literal terms (Pouivet 2013), contrary to the massive historical evidence that religious thinkers within any tradition have constantly defended the view that religious beliefs are not to be assumed literally (several Revelations consist properly in novel interpretations of previous religious materials).

The problem addressed by (A), (B), and (C) is that the purely epistemic approach qualifies religious diversity as an *a priori* matter, that is, a logical fact relying on the relation of compatibility and incompatibility among beliefs. For example, if you believe that *there is only one divine entity that can be predicated of being God*, whoever accepts that there are three or more divine entities that can be predicated of being God, *prima facie* denies your belief; if you believe that *a transcendent awareness without content is the only existing reality*, whoever accepts that a transcendent awareness of something is the only existing reality, *prima facie* denies your belief; finally, if you believe that *the Trinity of God should be accounted for by starting from the notion of oneness*, whoever holds that the Trinity of God should be accounted for by starting from the notion of threefoldness, *prima facie* denies your belief. What is common to all these cases is that accepting a proposition in terms of its literal meaning is not compatible with accepting a proposition whose literal meaning either is or involves the negation of the literal meaning of the first. An alethic relation of exclusion among the propositions occurs: they cannot be both believed at once because what is stated by one of them is denied by the other.

However, such understanding of diversity in religion collides with an unsurpassable difficulty: religious beliefs do not have a clear literal meaning, that is, they are required to be semantically analysed to express informative contents (I name *semantic analysis* the epis-



temic procedure of attributing meaning to a proposition).<sup>3</sup> In order to account for this claim (which admittedly may sound strongly controversial), consider the notions of *God*, *divine entity*, and *transcendent awareness*, which occur in the contested propositions. Each of these has an ordinary manner of being employed in non-scholarly language (e.g., something in the neighbourhood of the vocabulary definitions). This can be equated with the *prima facie* understanding of such notions. Nonetheless, experts in religion within any tradition and denomination usually debate about the correctness of such ordinary readings of the notions, aim at reforming them in light of more adequate and legitimate interpretations of the relevant revelation, and, unavoidably, establish different and incompatible characterisations of them.<sup>4</sup> For example, soteriological degree pluralists such as Karl Rahner or Shahid Mutahhari assented to orthodox statements of faith and accepted their literal utterance, although they gave them a meaning differing from that which fundamentalists or exclusivists accept (Legenhausen 2013).

This being the case, it is completely a contingent matter whether two religious individuals making explicit the meaning of their beliefs will agree or disagree. Since it cannot be established a priori which interpretation of the relevant notions involved they accept, it should not be inferred from the *prima facie* reading of their belief that a conceptual difference occurs here (the contrary holds too: two individuals assenting to the same claim may mean different things). The conclusion follows: the notion of religious diversity in terms of the logical relations of compatibility and incompatibility among beliefs should not be accepted as a given. It can turn out that such a notion is too raw to have any theoretical virtue of capturing facts about religious disagreements.

<sup>3</sup> My point is that, within the religious field, the relation between meanings and linguistic propositions is not a one-to-one function, primitively stipulated by literality. Meaning supervenes over linguistic proposition, in such a way that any proposition instantiates a plurality of divergent meanings. Literal readings are possibilities in the face of several other ones. My claim is then not that no literal reading of religious beliefs is meaningful, but that literal readings of religious beliefs are assessed as any other readings in terms of a semantic analysis. This implies that there are no primacy relations at all between literal and nonliteral readings of religious beliefs.

<sup>4</sup> The history of religions provides plenty of anecdotal evidence for my claim. Consider the exemplary case of the establishment of the legitimate interpretation of Christianity during the Council of Ephesus (431 AC). The Bishops attacked those Christians who confessed the Nicene Creed assuming an incorrect interpretation of it. The problem was that “some pretend to confess and accept the Nicene Creed, while at the same time distorting the force of its expressions to their own opinion” (The Definition of Faith). Although the writers of the text understand correctness and incorrectness in terms of true and false readings, according to standards of the age, it is clear from the amount of literature which they quote, that the evidence of semantic indeterminacy of religious beliefs was perfectly in their view (Bertini 2018). A few years will pass, and the exegetical schools of spiritual readings of biblical inconsistent passages will flourish, and will establish nonliteral interpretations as common rules for making sense of ambiguity of beliefs.

#### 4. *A Thought Experiment in Support of the Relational and Doxastic Approach to Religious Diversity*

Regardless of whether an epistemic religious disagreement over a proposition P is global, interdenominational or intradenominational, and regardless of how such categories should be qualified, disagreements over a religious proposition begin with the awareness that the contested beliefs challenge each other. There is an acknowledgement here: individuals become doxastic opponents when they are ready to recognise that the rival's view provides something important to think about, because it offers evidence that someone satisfies their spiritual needs in a manner that is oblique, diverging, and far away from that of the other. Such a claim means to point out that, contrary to the received approach by which disagreements provide evidence to be managed on the sole basis of the epistemic contents of opposing beliefs, acknowledging that a belief challenges one's views is not an apriori matter; rather, it is the result of a relational process engaging disagreeing individuals (Bertini 2021). The assumption is that religious beliefs propositionally represent, publicly establish, and intersubjectively give voice to how individuals understand their religious life. Accordingly, religious diversity has to do with a challenge towards one's commitments: individuals understand that they enjoy different religious experiences; the representation by beliefs of such a difference questions their own experiences; and, consequently, people react to the fact that others think and live religious matters differently.

##### 4.1. *Discovering Religious Diversity*

I will introduce a thought experiment to develop a few considerations on the epistemology of religious diversity. A methodological statement is required. My story is a hypothetical epistemic situation, which provides an idealised doxastic comparison between peers (although I hope that the idealisation is a sufficiently rich scenario for permitting the flow of substantive informative content). Naturally, the story is not an empirical one. I do not assume that individuals experiencing religious diversity behave as my characters do, nor that the outcomes of empirical research on actual phenomena of inter-religious relations cohere with my scenario. As usual in epistemology, my work focuses on a "what-if" situation, namely, what would be the rational answers to an epistemic issue if a given situation occurs. Consequently, my main concern is with plausibility: if my scenario is a real possibility, the story can highlight which legitimate epistemic attitudes are appropriate. The focus is on the notion of peerhood. Elsewhere I suggested reasons against a few mainstream assumptions on what it is to be epistemic peers (Bertini 2021) by setting forth doubts in reason of their abstractness and aprioristic commitments. My claim is that the richness of particularities on which the story relies can point conclusively at the ne-

cessity of quitting apriori reasoning in religious diversity and set forth the way for an empirical understanding of what is epistemic peerhood.

Saul, John, and Mohammed are friends. Saul is a Jew, John a Christian, and Mohammed a Muslim. Sometimes they speak about religion. When they do, they are contented with thinking that they are all monotheists. Possibly, they hold that they all believe in the same God: differences in their doctrines are simply due to differences in the social context wherein their revelation occurred and in the history that has developed from then on. However, they accept that such differences play a role in their religious affiliation. Each of them thinks that while the religion of the others may provide them with salvation, their revelation is more fit to achieving such a condition because of some epistemic virtues. Inclusivist readings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (which have developed throughout the history of these traditions) show that my hypothesis has empirical evidence in support (Race 1986; Cohn-Sherbok 1996; Khalil 2016). In this situation, John, Saul, and Mohammed do not think that they experience a real difference in religious matters. Naturally, they are aware that their religious commitments are different; however, they understand such diversity as something relating to the surface of the issue. If they go in-depth, they cannot find reasons for believing that they are different from a religious standpoint: they have faith in the same God, they apply similar ethical codes (Küng 2002), they evaluate what is relevant and what is not by analogous criteria, and so on. In this scenario, none of them appears to be challenged by the religious beliefs of the others. This does not imply epistemic apathy; rather, each of the three friends is ready to acknowledge a degree of truth to the views of the others. On one side, they epistemically behave in a kind of pragmatic pluralism, on the other they hold that their disagreement is not a crucial fact challenging their faiths. However, things suddenly change one day. That evening, Pasolini's movie *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* was scheduled at their favourite movie theater. None of the three friends ever saw the masterpiece. For this reason, John asked the others whether they would like to watch it with him. Naturally, they were positive. During the show, both Saul and Mohammed remained astonished. They were both fascinated by how Jesus appeared to their eyes: he was a real, perfect, and sublime man and the natural object of an unstoppable love. Nonetheless, Saul felt also disappointed by how Hebrew authorities are painted in the movie, and, accordingly, began to develop contrasting feelings about whether Jesus was so fascinating. Mohammed, for his part, had something like an epiphany: for the first time, he understood why his Christian friend was so attracted by a God who became a man. After the show, the three friends engaged in a fueled conversation about who Jesus was and established their different beliefs over the topic. From that day on, they have sunk into the experience of their religious diversity: their different ideas on Jesus

represent the different perspectives on which they focus in living their religiosity. What changed from the former to the latter situation is that now the three friends cannot confine differing beliefs on the surface: Saul and Mohammed have felt how appealing Christianity may be, and perfectly understand that it is a challenge to their faith. John has not stood firm either: while his friends defended their views, he reacted to such apologies, and became familiar with the attractiveness of their ideas. The direct experience of how the faith of others challenges their own grounds a new understanding of what their beliefs represent, and generates an epistemic reaction.

#### 4.2. *Epistemic Anxiety*

The basic form of religious dissent can be represented in a propositional manner. Saul claims that Jesus was a saint, but he denies that he showed any supernatural feature in his life; John claims that Jesus was the Son of God, namely, the incarnation of the second divine Person of the Trinity; Mohammed claims that Jesus was the last prophet before the revelation of Islam, and that, although he was not the Son of God, a supernatural relation to God was the substance of his life.

However, such a propositional approach sets aside the essential of the three friends' thought experiment: they acquired awareness of their theoretical disagreements by having personally enjoyed a lively experience of how much the beliefs of others challenge their own. Consequently, the matter at issue does not simply consist of evaluating which of their belief is the more probable, given their evidence; rather, because of their uncertainty towards beliefs which they are not willing to give up, they are pushed to determine definitively how things stand.

The crucial point is that they experience a kind of anxiety. From a psychological viewpoint, anxiety is an emotional state caused by uncertainty. Basically, anxiety is a response to a threat flowing from an internal conflict generated from a plurality of incompatible imaginations of future scenarios. It is a modal psychological state of mind; something like randomly accessing different possible worlds wherein challenging states of affairs occur, and being incapable of managing such a rich realm of different and incompatible possibilities in the meantime (Steimer 2002). Now, when disagreements are real, namely, when they are first-person experiences as those enjoyed by John, Saul, and Mohammed, disagreements are somehow analogous with anxious states of mind. Indeed, an undetermined uneasy psychological state related to the incapability of silencing the challenge set forth by the beliefs of others flows from disagreements and makes dissenters unable to react properly to such a plurality of possible realisations, similar to what happens when anxiety is experienced in front of different and torturing possibilities. To a certain respect, disagreements externalise what anxiety internally is to one single mind. Participants in a disagreement situation make it possible for others to access those alternative

scenarios which hold for any of them. If such participants acknowledge each other's epistemic peerhood, any of them show the reasons why their epistemic situation is attractive. They invite others to take part in a lively possibility. As a consequence, epistemic anxiety acquires an overriding epistemic value. My favorite way to characterise such value consists in focusing on its normative nature: whenever individuals disagree on grounding topics because of experiential access to their religious diversity, their anxiety towards the matter should incline them to pursue indefinite inquiry on the issue. This means that epistemic anxiety plays the role of a fuel of any proper process of evidence evaluation between disagreeing religious individuals (who personally experienced their religious diversity).<sup>5</sup>

#### 4.3. *The Relational and Doxastic Approach to Religious Diversity*

In my view, the following are the main facts attested by the three friends thought experiment. First, Saul, Paul, and Mohammed cannot simply evade, ignore, or forget their doxastic opposition, because they had the experience of how much the beliefs of others challenge their own, and they have mutual esteem for their ability to draw correct evaluations concerning several important things, among which there is religion (remember that before the acknowledgement of their diversity, each of the three had a good opinion of the religiosity of the others). Such impossibility of bracketing the awareness that their beliefs are challenged is constituted by the reactive generation of religious diversity: they have a certainty that their beliefs are threatened because they enjoyed a relevant experience (call this feature *the experiential origin of epistemic anxiety*).

Second, the focus of their debate is not scholarly. They are not intellectuals having a professional exchange of opinions. Rather, they are sincere religious individuals who want to be correct in their views, because they experienced a strong epistemic anxiety concerning the soundness of their beliefs. Particularly, they are not actualising global instances of religious diversity: their issue originates from a particular topic (i.e., the religious meaning of the life of Jesus) which is

<sup>5</sup> Quantitative sociological research attests that a common reaction to disagreements is steadfastness free from anxiety. Such a result depends on that doxastic opponents are not peers in most ordinary epistemic encounters. Imagine introducing in the scenario a new epistemic agent claiming that Jesus is an alien. Naturally enough, there would be no reason to think that such a claim would provoke anxiety in the three friends. The reason is that such a claim will qualify the new epistemic agent as a non-peer. Epistemic anxiety is the outcome of epistemic peerhood. Quantitative inquiries manifest steadfastness free from anxiety in inter-religious relations because they concern non-peerhood relations. On the contrary, literature on relevant epistemic debates in religious matters, such as *Scriptural Reasoning* or historical cases of authentic religious debate for instance, provides *prima facie* evidence that, when doxastic opponents deal with each other as peers, the epistemic process of evidence sharing is moved on by attitudes which are a variety of what I taxonomise as epistemic anxiety.

interpreted by partially overlapping views. As such, the issue cannot be solved by means of a logical analysis of the doctrinal body of three mutually excluding religions. Rather, the focus of their inquiry is the way competing different understandings of Jesus's life substantiate the concrete religious lives of each of the three friends, and how much each of these interpretations is attractive to any of the three friends (this is *the interpersonal nature of religious diversity*).

Third, they do not have any arguments capable of persuading others to change their view. This is a very frustrating thing: they would like to confirm from a cognitive viewpoint what they experientially live every day, but they cannot, because the others do not give their assent to the claims which are so essential to each of them (label this fact *the undecidability of religious disagreements*).

Fourth, even worse is that none of them assumes to be in a better position than the others. Possibly, after a few debates, they can rationalise their dissent (I use the term rationalise according to its use in psychology and sociology), and can find rest to their anxiety by deluding themselves to have a privileged access to evidence. However, although some scholars defend such an answer (notably, Plantinga 2000), this position is not supported by strong reasons: it is a *petitio principii*, where it is assumed that a side in a disagreement is right because either it has better access to evidence or evaluates the available evidence in the correct manner (the disjunction begs the question because it assumes what should be proved). I am not claiming that debates do not ordinarily go this way (e.g., van Inwagen 1996). Naturally, from time to time parties in a disagreement presume to be right because their position is their own. Nonetheless, even if such a move may also have a descriptive value, it is unmotivated from a prescriptive standpoint (call this *epistemic symmetry between the disagreeing parties*). Naturally, steadfast theorists relying on partisan reasoning as a basic ground for not conciliating do not think that standing firm is an act of rationalised delusion motivated by the need to stop the flow of epistemic anxiety. Their point is that assenting to framework propositions stipulating a determinate epistemic viewpoint makes an individual able to appreciate precisely that evidence in support of their claims, and that, in the absence of conclusive reasons against such evidence, there is no reason to dismiss a belief which could be the right one. Nonetheless, steadfast theorists epistemically suggest in this way to behave in the face of intractable disagreements as if rationalisations of dissent is the good option: you accept your belief in terms of your having access to a given epistemic situation; you cannot be persuaded that contrary evidence is defeating your belief because you do not access the epistemic situation of your opponents; you and your opponent have no reason to dismiss your beliefs because none of you has the access to the evidence that is at the disposal of the other; the evidence is there, but you evaluate such evidence non challenging for reasons which are not relating to the



content of the controversy – simply because it is not your own, it is not what you can appreciate given your epistemic standpoint (van Inwagen 2010).

Fifth, epistemic symmetry is anecdotally experienced by religious individuals involved in a disagreement. That is, since each of the three friends anecdotally accesses evidence, none of the three friends is a prototypical exemplar of the tradition to which he adheres. Their epistemic sharing of evidence concerns particular facts, which have a particular justification.

#### 4.4. *Which Answer to Religious Diversity*

The epistemological debate on disagreement has been largely shaped by the use of the uniqueness principle in support of conciliationism and permissivism in support of the steadfast view (Christensen 2009). Such bifurcation can certainly be relaxed in both camps. Conciliationists may argue for their preferred option even in case permissiveness is assumed (Christensen 2007). Steadfast theorists may refer to permissiveness only as a supplemental reason for standing firm (Frances and Matheson 2024). Nonetheless, relating uniqueness to conciliationism and permissiveness to steadfastness is somewhat constitutive in the epistemology of religious disagreements. Therefore, I will develop my following considerations by such assumption. Suppose that you are a friend of the view that a certain situation supports one epistemic answer alone. This being the case, whenever a disagreement occurs, there is only one correct position to hold. Your opponent and you are both epistemically competent, have comparable access to evidence, and cannot arrive at a decision over which belief is the sound one. Consequently, you should conciliate, namely, you should withhold from assuming a view and suspend your judgement (Feldman 2006; Elga 2007; Kornblith 2010). On the contrary, suppose that you accept that more than one justified position is permitted by one and the same situation. You can then answer the disagreement by standing firm in your belief: it may be that the doxastic opposition does not concern commensurable beliefs (Pittard 2014; Choo 2021), that being spineless does not favour any epistemic benefit and success (Elgin 2010), or that conciliating bootstraps the opposite view (Aikin, Harbour, Neufeld and Talisse 2010). In any case, the steadfast view suggests being resolute towards your beliefs.

Apply all this to the disagreement between Saul, John, and Mohamed. When their religious diversity was not in focus, they considered each other equally good religious individuals. Since their interest in religion is not scholarly but practical, from their mutual acknowledgment that they are equally good religious individuals, it follows that each of them attributes a sufficient degree of capabilities in religious matters to the others. As a consequence, none of them can assume that



the others *prima facie* assess their evidence in the wrong way. Now, the core belief generating their disagreement concerns the nature of Jesus. They started sharing their evidence on such a topic after the movie show. They have interacted longly (and their debate is still going on) over how their different religious lives depend on their understanding of the nature of Jesus. The different characterisation of him is a representation of their difference in faith. Therefore, they have at present comparable access to the body of evidence. Nonetheless, the belief about the nature of Jesus is undecidable to them, that is, there are no conclusive arguments at their disposal to which John, Paul and Mohammed assent.

Conciliation is not a possibility here, contrary to the intuition that it could be one. If your opponent and you are equally good in epistemic matters, and your shared evidence is not sufficient to decide which of a couple of contrary beliefs is the true one, it seems rational to conclude that the evidence at stake is not good evidence in support of either conclusions. Now, John, Paul, and Mohammed are in a relation of epistemic symmetry to evidence (each of them accesses the same evidence with a comparable competency, and they nonetheless cannot provide definitive arguments in support of their view in the face of the objections of others), and the contested beliefs are undecidable. However, they cannot withhold their beliefs, due to their experiential access to their disagreement, and the generation of epistemic anxiety which follows it. Particularly, contrary to the purely epistemic approach to conciliation assuming that undecidability depends *apriori* on the paucity of evidence in support, the relational and doxastic features of religious diversity show that the paucity of evidence is not an empirical character of the disagreements generated by religious diversity.

When each of the three friends experiences that the viewpoints of the others radically challenge theirs, they do not indeed access the epistemic fact that they have no good evidence in support of their claims. Rather, each of the three friends *experiences* that others have as good evidence as their own. This is the shocking outcome of their incapability of coming to a shared belief over Jesus. That is, the situation is not about the paucity of evidence in support. Religious disagreements such as John's, Paul's, and Mohammed's, are not an instance of a Quinean scenario wherein beliefs are evidentially underdetermined (Quine 1959). On the contrary, each of the three friends shows to the others that his way of understanding Jesus' life is compelling, challenging, and adequately supported by good arguments and good religious reasons. The problem is then that there is too much good evidence, namely, the abundance of evidence overdetermines what the three beliefs about Jesus represent. When the three friends use the term Jesus, the sense by which they refer to Jesus is not scarcely determined; rather, there are many over-detailed and competing senses representing Jesus in incompatible manners, although all of these are working. Consequently, given that Feldman's, Elga's and Kornblith's reasons for

conciliation rely on the paucity of evidence, their prescriptive answer does not apply here.

A further reason for the inapplicability of the conciliationist prescription relies on the normative nature of epistemic anxiety: doxastic opponents feel anxiety because they are required to answer the disagreement to hold their beliefs, but they cannot do it. Anxiety is a mark of something going wrong with the support relation between evidence and belief. Particularly, while the contested beliefs are mandatory to each of the three friends, the experiential access to the fact that others reasonably understand Jesus may mean that different manners to refer to something could provide alternative representational contents cohering with the same body of evidence. The suggestion is that if the interpersonal nature of religious disagreements generates epistemic anxiety, given that such anxiety arises from the experiential access to the reasonableness of the views of others, the interpersonal nature of religious disagreements is an experientially grounded reason for the claim that a plurality of replies to evidence are epistemically permitted.

Unfortunately, the resolute option is not more promising than the conciliatory. The motivations for standing firm are indeed defeated by the following reasons. First, John, Paul, and Mohammed cannot think that the views of the others are not commensurable to their own. If they thought this way, they would have not experienced epistemic anxiety. But, if they did not experience epistemic anxiety, they could have no reason to think that more than one response to evidence is epistemically permitted. Therefore: either they do not feel anxiety, and, accordingly, they could conciliate, or they do feel anxiety, and, accordingly, they should not stand firm because of the incommensurability of their beliefs. As in the previous case, the purely epistemic approach to steadfastness cannot provide a good prediction of how real disagreements behave.

Second, I may argue that conciliationism should be opposed because I hold that disagreements are bearers of epistemic benefits (Elgin 2010; Dormadandy 2020; Bertini 2021). Nonetheless, if this is my strategy, I cannot endorse steadfastness either. Disagreements favour epistemic improvements of beliefs because they push doxastic opponents to re-evaluate their first-order evidence and to include objections and replies to objections within their body of evidence. However, when this strategy is pursued, the doxastic opponents decide not to stand firm, but to check again whether they have good reasons for their belief. Such a move obviously requires that each party in the disagreement is ready to learn from the rival one. It would be odd if someone said: *I do not agree with you, I am right and I do not move from my viewpoint; in any case, let me see whether your reasons are good*. I cannot see how it can be that my opponent is not joking, and they are willing to learn from me and accept that they could be wrong and I can be right. The relational and doxastic features of the empirically informed view of

religious diversity cohere with the way a disagreement may promote epistemic benefits to both sides of a dispute.

Third, it is true that unilateral conciliation may cause the undesired consequence that the steady party of a disagreement would find additional reason for standing firm: if someone conciliates in the face of a disagreement, the epistemic opponent refusing to conciliate seems to be rational in taking their evidence stronger than those in support to the other side, given that the other gave up their view. However, this fact does not constitute a real reason for steadfastness. It would be one if either conciliationism or standing firm were the only epistemic options. What really happens when individuals discover their religious diversity shows that a third view is on the marketplace, namely, engaging in an epistemic debate on the truth of the matter.<sup>6</sup>

## 5. Conclusions

The main consequence of my way of modeling religious diversity is that apriori normative prescriptions towards how to manage religious disagreements should be set aside in favour of pursuing an epistemic process of evidence sharing. The dichotomy consists in that the former assumes that opposing beliefs reveal evidentially their contrast by simply stating the propositions at stake, and the latter asks for interpersonal in-depth work on meaning. That is to say, if my description of how religious individuals disagree is empirically more on target than the purely epistemic approach, suggestions to conciliation or holding firm springing from apriori reasoning about the logical properties of incompatible beliefs should be evaluated unjustified in providing a reasonable answer.

According to my proposal, although religious disagreements naturally concern the truth-value of the involved propositions, namely, they are ultimately epistemic disputes about which of the contested propositions is the adequate representation of the matter at issue, such disagreements have relational and doxastic features which cannot be left on the side. This means that religious diversity is not a global affair

<sup>6</sup> Notoriously, the Rawls-Habermas debate addresses issues in the neighbourhood of the hoped practical outcomes of my work (Kedziora 2019). Both working within a neo-Kantian setting, the two thinkers analyse and criticise each other on how to manage the fragmentation of beliefs in contemporary societies. While my epistemic approach is oblique to the socio-political focus of their debate, my considerations can be found in line with Habermas' (and Apel's) inspiring principles towards the construal of a theoretical ethics of discourse. Particularly, translating ideally generalised doxastic comparisons between groups into empirical cases of actual relationships between individuals is a way to fill in relations of epistemic diversity with contents. This also answers a possible objection to my approach, namely, the difficulty of generating inductive results in religious studies of diversity. Good epistemological practices in the face of diversity suggest focusing on empirical particularities and fixing controversies in mutual knowledge. Qualitative research is the main asset to give voice to my proposal.

relating to the doctrinal body of competing traditions. Rather, it is a reactive awareness by means of which concrete individuals accept that their particular (i.e., anecdotal) views are challenged, and, accordingly, start engaging in a process of evidence sharing. This process is motivated by the willingness to make an experience of the opponent's standing point. As a consequence, you cannot simply bear that someone thinks differently from how you do, and remain untouched by this fact: you should act responsibly to your belief, and begin exploring the in-depth binds of an interpersonal confrontation.

## References

- Aikin, S. F., Harbour, M., Neufeld, J., and Talisse, R. B. 2010. "Epistemic Abstainers, Epistemic Martyrs, and Epistemic Converts." *Logos & Episteme* 1 (2): 211–219.
- Alston, W. P. 1992. *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Reprint edition). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Bertini, D. 2016. *Tradizioni religiose e diversità*. Verona: Edizioni Fondazione Centro Studi Campostrini.
- Bertini, D. 2018. "The Anecdotal Nature of Religious Disagreements." *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 80 (3): 215–229.
- Bertini, D. 2019. "On What a Religion Is Not." *Religions* 10 (1): 29.
- Bertini, D. 2020. "The Vagueness of Religious Beliefs." *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 12 (2): 181–210.
- Bertini, D. 2021. "Anecdotal Pluralism, Total Evidence and Religious Diversity." *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 49 (1): 155–173.
- Bertini, D. 2022. "Anecdotal Pluralism." *Logos & Episteme* 13 (2): 117–142.
- Bogardus, T. 2013. "Disagreeing with the (Religious) Skeptic." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 74 (1): 5–17, 19.
- Choo, F. 2021. "The Epistemic Significance of Religious Disagreements: Cases of Unconfirmed Superiority Disagreements." *Topoi* 40 (5): 1139–1147.
- Christensen, D. 2007. "Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News." *The Philosophical Review* 116 (2): 187–217.
- Christensen, D. 2009. "Disagreement as Evidence: The Epistemology of Controversy." *Philosophy Compass* 4/5: 756–767.
- Cipriani, R. 2009. "La religione dei valori diffusi." *La società degli individui* 34 (1): 40–52.
- Cohn-Sherbok, D. 1996. "Jewish Religious Inclusivism." *CrossCurrents* 46 (3): 326–342.
- Dormandy, K. 2020. "The Epistemic Benefits of Religious Disagreement." *Religious Studies* 56 (3): 390–408.
- Elga, A. 2007. "Reflection and Disagreement." *Noûs* 41 (3): 478–502.
- Elgin, C. Z. 2010. "Persistent Disagreement." In R. Feldman and T. A. Warfield (eds.), *Disagreement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 53–68.
- Feldman, R. 2006. "Epistemological Puzzles about Disagreements." In S. Hetherington (ed.), *Epistemology Futures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 216–236.

- Feldman, R. 2010. "Reasonable Religious Disagreements." In L. M. Anthony (ed.). *Philosophers Without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 194–214.
- Frances, B. and Matheson, J. 2024. "Disagreement." In E. N. Zalta and U. Nodelman (eds.). *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2024 Edition).
- Gellman, J. 2000. "In Defence of a Contented Religious Exclusivism." *Religious Studies* 36 (4): 401–417.
- Harrison, V. S. 2006. "Internal Realism and the Problem of Religious Diversity." *Philosophia* 34 (3): 287–301.
- Kedziora, K. 2019. "Habermas and Rawls on an Epistemic Status of the Principles of Justice." *Acta Universitatis Lodzianensis* 34: 31–46.
- Khalil, M. H. 2016. "Islam and the Salvation of Others." In R. McKim (ed.). *Religious Perspectives on Religious Diversity*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 149–161.
- Kornblith, H. 2010. "Belief in the Face of Controversy." In R. Feldman and T. A. Warfield (eds.). *Disagreement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 29–52.
- Küng, H. 2002. *Wozu Weltethos? Religion und Ethik in Zeiten der Globalisierung*. Freiburg: Herder, Freiburg.
- Legenhausen, M. 2013. "Nonreductive Pluralism and Religious Dialogue." In M. H. Khalil (ed.). *Between Heaven and Hell. Islam, Salvation, and the Fate of Others*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 153–179.
- Malcolm, N. 2000. "The Groundlessness of Belief." In B. Davis (ed.). *Philosophy of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 115–122.
- McKim, R. 2012. *On Religious Diversity* (1 edition.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pittard, J. 2014. "Conciliationism and Religious Disagreement." In M. Bergman and P. Kain (eds.). *Challenges to Moral and Religious Belief: Disagreement and Evolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 80–97.
- Plantinga, A. 1999. "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism." In P. L. Quinn and K. Meeker (eds.). *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 172–192.
- Potter, D. 2013. "Religious Disagreement: Internal and External." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 74 (1): 21–31.
- Pouivet, R. 2013. *Epistémologie des croyances religieuses*. Paris: CERF.
- Quine, W. van O. 1959. "Meaning and Translation." In R. A. Brower (ed.). *On Translation*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 148–172.
- Race, A. 1986. "Christianity and Other Religions: Is Inclusivism Enough?" *Theology* 89 (729): 178–186.
- Steimer, T. 2002. "The Biology of Fear- and Anxiety-related Behaviors." *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 4 (3): 231–249.
- Taylor, C. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- van Inwagen, P. 1996. "It Is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone, to Believe Anything upon Insufficient Evidence." In J. Jordan and D. Howard-Snyder (eds.). *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 137–153.
- van Inwagen, P. 2010. "We're Right. They're Wrong." In R. Feldman and T. A. Warfield (eds.). *Disagreement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 10–28.

- Warner, S. R. 1993. "Work in Progress Toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the USA." *American Journal of Sociology* 98 (5): 1044–1093.
- Warner, S. R. 2008. "Parameters of Paradigms: Toward a Specification of the U.S. Religion Market System." *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 21 (2): 129–146.
- Woodhead, L. 2009. "Old, New, and Emerging Paradigms in the Sociological Study of Religion." *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 22 (2): 103–121.