

Conciliationism and Religious Disagreement

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November, 2013

Every known system of religious belief or explicitly *irreligious* belief has among its core teachings claims that are sharply contested by sizeable contingents of apparently reasonable and well-informed people. Many have argued that reflection on this fact ought to shake our confidence in our religious or irreligious beliefs, leading us to be religious skeptics (e.g., Feldman 2007; Schellenberg 2007, 175–83; Kraft 2010). According to these advocates of religious skepticism, confident religious or irreligious belief in the face of pervasive religious disagreement amounts to a kind of dubious epistemic egotism according to which one privileges her own assessment of the relevant evidence simply because it is hers. In this essay, I assess the case for such disagreement-motivated religious skepticism. Specifically, I consider whether there is a good philosophical argument for disagreement-motivated religious skepticism that does not rely on controversial theological claims but that relies only on general epistemic principles and facts about religious disagreement. My argument is that the prospects for such an argument are dim even if there are plausible views on disagreement that support skeptical responses to disagreements in other contexts. Certain features of religious belief make it unlikely that such views will generate skeptical results when applied to religious disagreements.

My approach will be as follows. In §§1-2 I sketch a “conciliatory” view on disagreement, largely taken from the work of David Christensen, that is both *plausible* and, at least in a wide range of disagreements, *genuinely skeptical* in its prescriptions. I then argue (in §§3-5) that many religions propose non-standard theories of epistemic credentials with features that make it unlikely that the view on disagreement sketched in §§1-2 can be used to successfully support religious skepticism. In §6, I consider another view that imposes even more demanding conciliatory requirements without sacrificing plausibility, and argue that this view also fails to underwrite religious skepticism.

1. CONCILIATIONISM

It is obvious that the discovery that someone disagrees with my belief that p should at least sometimes cause me to be less confident in my disputed belief. The primary area of controversy in the epistemology of disagreement has to do with the conditions under which the *prima facie* threat posed by disagreement can be reasonably resisted. It seems that if I am to confidently and reasonably maintain my own view in the face of persistent disagreement, I need a good reason for thinking either that I have better evidence than my disputer or that my assessment of the relevant evidence is more reliable than the assessment of my disputer. Moreover, it also seems that I cannot reasonably hold that my own evidence or evidential reasoning is superior simply because it is *my* evidence or *my* reasoning; for the mere fact that

my evidence and reasoning are my own has no direct bearing on the question of whether my assessment of the disputed proposition is more or less reliable than my disputant's assessment. So what might count as a good reason for thinking that my own assessment is more reliable than my disputant's? There are two types of reasons I might appeal to. First, I might be able to appeal to reasons for thinking my assessment more reliable that do not themselves depend on my particular perspective on the dispute at hand. For instance, I might have reasons for thinking that I am more informed, more sober, or more attentive than my disputant, and I might be able to establish this (to my own satisfaction) without having to presuppose that my view on the disputed topic is correct. Most everyone agrees that I can reasonably dismiss the views of a disputant on the basis of such *dispute-independent* reasons. But suppose that dispute-independent reasons for trusting my own perspective are not forthcoming. Suppose that the only reasons I have for trusting my own perspective rather than the perspective of my disputant are *partisan* reasons, reasons that would be accepted only by someone who already took my side (or was inclined to take my side) in the dispute. Can such partisan, *dispute-dependent* reasons be a good basis for doubting the reliability of my disputant? This question serves as the primary point of contestation in debates over the epistemic significance of disagreement (Christensen 2011, 1–2). On one side, “conciliationists” contend that it is illegitimate to rely significantly on partisan reasoning in order to dismiss a disagreement threat.¹ Since disagreement has raised a worry about the reliability of my reasoning on the matter under dispute, conciliationists contend that it would be unacceptably question-begging for me to dismiss that worry for reasons whose force depends on the reliability of the very reasoning being called into question (Christensen 2011). Opponents of conciliationism, on the other hand, maintain that partisan reasoning can and often does provide a legitimate basis for dismissing skeptical worries posed by disagreement.

2. FROM STRONG TO MODERATE CONCILIATIONISM

I have characterized conciliationists as those who question the legitimacy of dismissing a disagreement threat on the basis of partisan, dispute-dependent reasons. But while all conciliationists are agreed that disagreement puts pressure on the disputants to rely on non-partisan reasons in their assessment of the disagreement's epistemic significance, conciliationists differ with respect to the question of whether *some* reliance on partisan reasoning may be acceptable (perhaps in combination with independent reasoning) or whether one's assessment of the disagreement's significance must be altogether independent of one's contested reasoning on the matter under dispute. Let us use ‘strong conciliationism’ to designate the view that *any* reliance on partisan reasoning in one's assessment of a disagreement's epistemic significance is irrational.²

Strong conciliationism leads to implausible results, as shown by the following example.³ I strike up a conversation with a man in a bookstore who is reading a thick astrological tome entitled *Stars Tell All*. After learning about my low regard for astrology, the man proceeds to share with me his many reasons for thinking that the astrological theory developed in *Stars*

¹ The term ‘conciliationism’ is taken from Elga (2010). I use the term in a way that differs somewhat from Elga’s use of the term.

² Adam Elga’s “equal weight view” (2007, 490) is one instance of strong conciliationism.

³ The example is similar in spirit to an example of Christensen’s (2011, 15).

Tell All is fully reliable. I am not persuaded, and we proceed to have a debate over the merits of the book that ends in deadlock. Finally, he asks whether my confidence in my assessment of the book is shaken by the fact that he sharply disagrees with that assessment, even after our lengthy conversation. My confidence is not shaken, I explain, since he is relying on types of reasoning known to be fallacious, since the vast majority of people would find his views crazy, and since I *know* that I am being sincere in my evaluation of the book but I don't know whether he legitimately believes the book to be reliable. Upon hearing this, the man knowingly smiles, and shows me a passage in *Stars Tell All* that says that only Capricorns are reliable at distinguishing sound reasoning from fallacious reasoning, and that non-Capricorns are very bad at determining whether or not they sincerely hold the views they are defending and whether or not the majority of people are likely to judge some particular view to be crazy. Since I am not a Capricorn (unlike my interlocutor, it turns out), I can reasonably rely on my ability to distinguish fallacious and sound reasoning only if I presuppose that *Stars Tell All* is not fully reliable. And the same goes for my reliance on my beliefs concerning what the majority of people would think about *Stars Tell All* and whether or not my reported negative evaluation of the book is sincere: relying on these beliefs is reasonable only if I do not affirm the reliability of *Stars Tell All*. But this means that my reasons for dismissing my disputer as less reliable than I are in fact partisan reasons. Strong conciliationism would thus prohibit me from dismissing my disputer on such grounds. Moreover, we can imagine that the few independent bases I might have for assessing the relative epistemic credentials of my disputer and myself suggest that my disputer is *more* likely than me to be reliable on the matter under dispute. Perhaps I think that, in general, the older someone gets the more likely she is to have a reliable assessment of the merits of astrology, and that this is one of my few pertinent beliefs about epistemic credentials that is *not* disputed by *Stars Tell All*. If my disputer is older than me by a few years, then it might be the case that the only *independent* basis I have for evaluating our relative epistemic credentials suggests that my disputer is more likely to be reliable than I am. In this case, strong conciliationism would seem to suggest that I must give at least as much weight to my disputer's favorable evaluation of *Stars Tell All* as to my negative evaluation.

Since any significant degree of conciliation in this case would be unreasonable, strong conciliationism should be rejected as too extreme a position. It must be possible, at least in some circumstances, to reasonably dismiss a disagreement threat on the basis of partisan grounds. Conceding this point pushes the conciliationist towards a *moderate* conciliationism that does not postulate a principled rejection of all partisan reasoning in assessing the epistemic significance of disagreement, but that allows for a mixture of partisan and independent reasoning, perhaps with certain types of disagreements calling for a greater reliance on independent reasoning than other types.

Once the move from strong conciliationism to moderate conciliationism has been made, the project of articulating and motivating a conciliatory policy becomes much more difficult. When, exactly, is reliance on partisan reasoning in the assessment of a disagreement threat rationally permissible, and what factors determine how much reliance on partisan reasoning is acceptable? Might some types of partisan reasoning be more legitimate than others? Even if we can answer these difficult questions, it seems likely that the answers will be quite vague and that the prescriptions of moderate conciliationism will therefore be much less precise than those of strong conciliationism. Such imprecision is the unfortunate price of plausibility. Still,

we must make *some* headway in sketching plausible moderate conciliatory principles if we are to assess what implications moderate conciliationism might have for religious disagreement.

The work of David Christensen provides a useful starting point in our attempt to articulate a more moderate and plausible conciliatory position. A key claim of Christensen's is that in order for a disagreement to constitute a substantial skeptical threat, it is not enough that "the dispute-independent evaluation *fails* to give me good reason for confidence that I'm better informed, or more likely to have reasoned from the evidence correctly." Rather, disagreement generates pressure to revise my beliefs only "insofar as the dispute-independent evaluation *gives* me good reason to be confident that the other person is equally well-informed, and equally likely to have reasoned from the evidence correctly" (2011, 15). On Christensen's view, the conciliatory pressure generated by a disagreement is a function of the *strength* of my dispute-independent reasons for trusting my disputant. In cases where I lack any independent grounds for comparing my disputant's epistemic credentials with my own, or where I have only very weak independent reasons for thinking that my disputant's credentials rival my own, there will be less conciliatory pressure than in cases where a dispute-independent evaluation gives me strong, *positive* reasons for thinking that my disputant's credentials rival or surpass my own. This explains why conciliation is not required in the *Stars Tell All* case and in other cases where the dispute calls into question a good portion of the criteria I would normally use to assess epistemic credentials. In such cases, an independent evaluation of epistemic credentials must of necessity be based on a very attenuated set of considerations; and the fact that someone compares favorably to me when a very attenuated set of considerations are taken into account does not give me a strong reason for thinking that she would compare favorably if *all* relevant considerations were taken into account. So while in the *Stars Tell All* case I do have an independent reason for thinking my disputant more reliable (namely, his older age and the correlation of age and wisdom), that reason is extremely thin, resting on a very loose correlation whose evidential significance is likely to be swamped by any one of a number of other more telling factors. If the moderate conciliationism sketched by Christensen is correct, we should expect the conciliatory pressure resulting from such a thin reason to be minimal.

Much more must be said in order to fully develop a conciliatory policy, as Christensen himself emphasizes. But we can already make some significant progress in assessing the epistemic significance of religious disagreement if we accept the claim that the conciliatory pressure generated by a disagreement correlates with the strength of the independent reasons for trusting my disputant. So I will now argue that a moderate conciliationism incorporating this claim will give us little reason for thinking that religious skepticism is the reasonable response to religious disagreement.

3. RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND EPISTEMIC CREDENTIALS

If the moderate conciliationism that we began to sketch in the last section is correct, then the force of the skeptical worry occasioned by a disagreement will depend significantly on whether I have strong dispute-independent reasons for thinking that my disputant's epistemic qualifications with respect to the disputed proposition rival or surpass my own. My merely lacking an independent reason for taking myself to be more qualified, or my having only a thin, weak independent reason for taking my disputant to be more qualified, is not enough to generate substantial conciliatory pressure. I will now argue that in many cases of religious

disagreement, one or more of the parties to the dispute will affirm some “non-standard” view of epistemic qualifications with respect to religious questions, and that this view is likely to have features that make it unlikely that its proponents will have strong independent reasons for trusting the religious views of their disputants. When proponents of such non-standard theories encounter religious disagreement, they will typically be in a situation where, as in the *Stars Tell All* example, their *independent* reasons for trusting their disputants are too weak to generate significant skeptical pressure.

Consider the example of theist Terry. The epistemic significance of disagreement over theism will depend on the epistemic qualifications of both atheists and theists with respect to the question of God’s existence. According to moderate conciliationism, whether Terry will be under pressure to conciliate depends on whether she has strong independent reasons for thinking that her disputants’ qualifications with respect to this question rival the qualifications of those on her side of the dispute. What criteria should Terry use to assess her disputants’ epistemic qualifications? The answer to this question is, I suggest, much more contentious in a religious context than it is in most non-religious contexts. In non-religious contexts, there is typically widespread agreement on the criteria that are relevant to an assessment of someone’s epistemic qualifications. Much of this agreement stems from widespread trust in certain institutions that help to certify expertise (e.g., universities in their conferral of degrees and academic hiring), academic accomplishment (e.g., schools in their conferral of grades), the quality of someone’s research (e.g., research journals in their publishing decisions), and the reliability of an information source (e.g. respected media in their selection of which information to report). While agreement on which institutional signals and other factors are reliable indicators of epistemic qualification may break down in certain contexts, especially in more “ideologically-driven” disagreements, in most cases judgments about disputants’ epistemic credentials are noncontroversial enough to be used as premises in a skeptical argument without raising too many eyebrows.

But significant consensus regarding the relevant qualifications is not to be found in religious contexts. This is because many systems of religious belief include controversial claims about what qualifies one to reliably assess religious propositions, and these claims often downplay or deny the relevance of the specific criteria that, in the context of non-religious disagreements, one would typically rely upon in order to evaluate epistemic credentials. Religious theories of epistemic qualification might make use of the same *categories* as more standard, secular theories (e.g., institutional certification, intellectual virtue, familiarity with relevant evidence), but the specific qualifications are likely to differ substantially (e.g. certification by the church rather than by universities, journals, or media; spiritual discernment rather than raw intelligence and analytical sophistication; mystical experience rather than familiarity with publicly-available evidence).

Let’s suppose that Terry’s religious beliefs include not only theism, but also *T*, a theory about what epistemically qualifies one to assess the plausibility of religious claims (like the claim that God exists); and let’s further suppose that, like many religious views on epistemic credentials, *T* is highly “non-standard” in the sense that it denies or significantly downplays the relevance of many of the factors that one would normally rely on to assess epistemic credentials in non-religious contexts. In such a situation, will Terry have strong reasons for thinking that her atheist disputants are as qualified as her fellow theists? Well, if *T* gives Terry strong reason for thinking that her atheist disputants are just as qualified, then clearly the disagreement will have a high degree of skeptical significance for her. But, as I will argue in

§5, T is unlikely to deliver this verdict. Most religious theories of epistemic credentials are at least minimally *self-favoring* in that they are unlikely to give one a reason for thinking that those who disagree with one of the religion's principal claims are as qualified as those who accept those claims. I will argue for this claim shortly, but for now let's assume that T is self-favoring in this sense and does not give Terry a reason for thinking that her disputants are as qualified as her side in the debate. Even given this assumption, Terry still might have a reason for trusting her atheist disputants if an *independent* assessment relying only on Terry's non-partisan beliefs provided strong reasons for thinking that the atheists' epistemic qualifications rival the qualifications of those who are on Terry's side of the dispute. But an independent analysis is not likely to deliver this result. To see why, first note that in order to carry out a dispute-independent assessment of epistemic credentials, Terry must set aside all of the non-standard factors that are included in T for theological reasons and base her assessment only on the more standard factors that figure in T , factors whose epistemic relevance does not depend on whether theism or atheism is true. But given that T significantly downplays the significance of these factors, the most Terry will be able to affirm about such factors is that they at best *weakly* correlate with one's overall level of epistemic qualification. And this means that an independent evaluation based on such factors could at most give Terry weak reasons for trusting the views of her atheist disputants. For an evaluation that treated these standard factors as though they gave a full account of epistemic qualification would simply beg the question against Terry's religious view (which assigns those factors a marginal role) and would not be an independent evaluation. The most that can be affirmed of these standard factors in a dispute-independent evaluation is that they are at least weak indicators of overall epistemic qualification, and consequently a dispute-independent evaluation based on these factors cannot produce strong reasons for thinking one side more qualified than the other. The situation would be very much like that of the *Stars Tell All* example, where I have a very weak independent reason (the age of my interlocutor) for thinking the astrology believer to be more qualified, but not the type of reason that is strong enough to generate significant conciliatory pressure.

The discussion thus far suggests that even if moderate conciliationism is correct (and moderate conciliationism is, I have suggested, the only plausible form of conciliationism), the fact that many religious beliefs are part of belief systems with highly non-standard theories of epistemic credentials may prevent one from using moderate conciliationism to support religious skepticism. Of course many questions may be raised about the argument sketched above, and in the next two sections I'll consider two such questions: First, is it really the case that many religions include among their teachings highly non-standard theories about what determines one's epistemic qualifications with respect to religious questions? Second, even if many religious believers affirm non-standard theories of epistemic credentials, isn't it often the case that, *even according to these non-standard theories*, there are qualified people on both sides of major religious disputes? If so, then religious believers would have a good reason for assigning religious disagreements a high degree of epistemic significance. I will address these two questions in turn.

4. DO RELIGIONS REALLY ADVOCATE NON-STANDARD THEORIES OF EPISTEMIC CREDENTIALS?

I do not intend to argue in this paper that all major systems of religious belief have “non-standard” views on what qualifies one to assess important religious questions. There very well may be major systems of religious belief that hold that what qualifies one to assess religious claims is not significantly different from what qualifies one to assess philosophical or scientific questions (for example): analytic sophistication, thorough acquaintance with the publicly available evidence, certification by prestigious institutions that are widely-respected for the production of important scholarship, raw intelligence, freedom from corrupting bias, etc. Since most of these qualifications can be assessed in a non-partisan way, my argument has no bearing on such religious systems. If moderate conciliationism is correct, it may be that religious believers (or *irreligious* believers) who accept relatively standard theories of epistemic credentials ought to give up their religious (or irreligious) beliefs (or accept a different theory of epistemic credentials!). My argument is only that *many* religious believers subscribe to a system of religious belief that includes some non-standard theory of epistemic credentials, and that moderate conciliationism will typically *not* provide strong reasons for thinking that *these* believers should become religious skeptics. (Or, more modestly, the degree to which they should doubt their beliefs will be substantially lessened as a result of their commitment to non-standard theories of epistemic credentials.) Fully supporting this claim would require examining the religious epistemology of several different faith traditions, something clearly beyond the scope of this paper (and my expertise). So I will attempt something more limited. Using Christian theology as a case study, I will highlight an important biblical passage that calls into question “standard” views of epistemic credentials and that has significantly informed and inspired subsequent Christian theological reflection on epistemic credentials. This discussion will highlight some general considerations that I believe might move many religious people, not just Christians, to deny that standard epistemic qualifications are applicable in the realm of religion.

In a letter to the church in Corinth, the apostle Paul writes:

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us
who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,
‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?
Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God,
the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of
our proclamation, to save those who believe...For God’s foolishness is wiser than
human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. Consider your
own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not
many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in
the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the
strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce
to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of the God. (I
Corinthians 1:18-29)⁴

⁴ All biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

Paul implies in this passage that the possession of wisdom, or at least the possession of wisdom *as it is conventionally understood*,⁵ does not reliably help someone to arrive at the truth regarding God. It is, according to Paul, part of God's wise plan that human "wisdom" is not the means by which we may come to know God. While Paul does not exclude the possibility that those who are conventionally wise will come to accept "the message about the cross" (he does not say "none of you were wise," but only that "not many of you were wise"), on Paul's view God has a special interest in seeing to it that the community of believers is chiefly comprised of those who were "foolish" in the world's eyes: those without notable education, status, and power—the *hoi polloi*. Perhaps Paul's view is that in drawing people into the community of faith, God actively favors those who are "low and despised"; or, alternatively, it could just be that aspects of the Christian message make it particularly difficult for the powerful and credentialed to accept. In any case, the passage minimally implies that many factors that would normally count as epistemic qualifications in philosophical and scholarly contexts (for example), including intellectual sophistication, worldly experience, information (or at least the publicly available information available to the scholar), and scholarly reputation, are not relevant qualifications when it comes to assessing the claims of the gospel that Paul is preaching. In this sense Paul offers a non-standard theory of epistemic credentials.

While the language Paul uses in dismissing the wisdom of the age may strike many as overly extreme, he is in this passage expressing an idea that I believe many religious people, whether Christian or not, would endorse. While it is perhaps acknowledged that analytical sophistication and academic credentials may qualify one to make many judgments *about* religion, many do not think that these qualifications correlate with greater reliability with respect to enduring and important religious questions. The qualifications that *are* thought to be essential to the successful pursuit of spiritual and religious insight may differ significantly from believer to believer, but they will tend to be moral or distinctly religious qualifications rather than more straightforwardly intellectual ones: love of one's fellow human beings, love and desire for God, humility, detachment from material possessions, a desire for transcendence, or a willingness to trust God in the absence of proof from reason or perception. The candidate qualifications on this list differ tremendously from the kinds of qualifications you would hear mentioned if you asked what qualifies one to assess the plausibility of string theory, the economic effects of some proposed tax policy, or the merits of a piece of music. Among the most important differences is that the qualifications likely to be named in the religious context are not accessible primarily to the well-credentialed and powerful: they are thought to be as accessible to peasants as to elite scholars (if not more so). This does not mean that religious qualifications are easy to come by, but only that pronounced intelligence and significant education are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for their acquisition. Many thus affirm the sentiment of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous character Johannes Climacus, who satirizes the absurd idea that the accomplishment of Christian faith is becoming easier as society increases in its intellectual sophistication:

When Christianity entered into the world, there were no professors or assistant professors whatever—then it was a paradox for all. It can be assumed that in the

⁵ In the next chapter, Paul affirms that followers of Jesus are distinctive in their possession of a certain kind of wisdom, but not the "wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age." Rather, they possess a divine wisdom that is "secret and hidden" from the "rulers of this age." See I Corinthians 2:6 ff.

present generation every tenth person is an assistant professor; consequently it is a paradox for only nine out of ten. And when the fullness of time finally comes, that matchless future, when a generation of assistant professors, male and female, will live on the earth—then Christianity will have ceased to be a paradox. (Kierkegaard 1992, 220–1)

Since for Climacus the value of faith lies in its passionate commitment to what is, “objectively” considered, an absurdity (p. 209–211) he finds it comical to suppose that “objective” intellectual investigation of Christianity could aid in the production of faith by demonstrating the “reasonableness” of Christian claims.⁶

The fact that one’s religious beliefs are disputed by those who are epistemically qualified according to *standard* measures will not be a strong reason to doubt one’s religious beliefs if one accepts a religious epistemology that, like Paul’s, assigns a marginal (or nonexistent) role to such standard epistemic qualifications. If I am right in suggesting that many religious believers, both Christian and non-Christian, subscribe to non-standard theories of epistemic credentials with respect to religious beliefs, then an argument for religious skepticism that presupposes a standard theory of epistemic credentials will simply beg the question against many religious believers.

5. ARE RELIGIOUS THEORIES OF EPISTEMIC CREDENTIALS SELF-FAVORING?

At this point the religious skeptic might protest that an argument for disagreement-motivated religious skepticism does not need to presuppose some standard theory of epistemic credentials, for we have good reason to think that there are comparably qualified people on both sides of religious disputes *even if we operate within the assumptions of religious theories of epistemic credentials*. According to this response, there is no need for the religious believer to consider what her non-partisan views on epistemic qualifications imply about the credentials of her disputants, for even her *partisan* views on the relevant qualifications support the judgment that the qualifications of her disputants rival the qualifications of those who take her own side.

Against this response, I will argue in this section that religious theories of epistemic credentials tend to be self-favoring. By this I mean that a theory proposed by some particular religion is unlikely to give an adherent of that religion a reason for thinking that those who dispute that religion’s essential claims are as epistemically qualified as those who believe those claims. These theories are self-favoring in large part because the epistemic credentials they take to be important tend to be *partisan* and/or *opaque*, where these terms are to be understood as follows. A credential *C* proposed by religious belief system *B* is **partisan** just to the extent that, prior to one’s reasoning about the plausibility of *B* and knowledge of what people believe about *B*, there is reason to think that those who possess *C* are more likely to

⁶ To be fair, it is worth noting that for Climacus faith is not primarily about believing propositions in the typical straightforward sense of ‘believe’; it involves some form of passionate commitment to the Christian message. But Climacus’s sentiments remain relevant even if we take Christian faith to involve more straightforward belief in Christian claims: it does not seem sensible to suppose that propositional beliefs with such existential significance should come more easily to scholars than to others.

accept the teachings of *B* than those who do not possess *C*. And a credential *C* proposed by religious belief system *B* is **opaque** just to the extent that there is no reliable way to tell whether someone possesses *C* if one does not know whether this person accepts the claims of *B*. (I'm using 'opaque' to describe the credentials themselves, though properly speaking what is opaque is whether or not someone possesses the credential.) Just what it means for a credential to be partisan or opaque, and why theories featuring partisan and opaque credentials are self-favoring theories will, I hope, be clearly illustrated by the example to be discussed shortly.

Rather than examining the theological epistemologies of several different religious traditions in order to show that many of them feature partisan and/or opaque credentials and are for that reason self-favoring, I will again restrict my focus to an example from Christian theology. I believe that many other religious theories of epistemic credentials will be self-favoring in ways that are analogous to the example considered here, though I will not offer a defense of this point. Continuing, then, with the example of Paul, if we are to determine whether his theory of epistemic credentials is self-favoring, it is not enough to know only that his theory marginalizes certain standard credentials; we also need to know what credentials he puts in their place. What qualifications do Paul, and those Christian theologians inspired by him, think *are* required for reliable assessment of religious claims, including the "message of the cross" that Paul preaches? While matters become contentious here, a clear affirmation of Paul and Christian theology after him is that it is through God's gracious activity rather than through mere human accomplishment that believers are able to perceive the truth of the message of the cross and affirm this message in the act of faith. Moreover, God's activity consists in more than just presenting empirical evidence to the general population, whether that evidence be the life, death, and resurrection of Christ or the church's subsequent testimony about these matters. Proper response to whatever publicly available evidence we may possess is itself a work of the Holy Spirit in the believer. As Paul later writes in the same letter to the Corinthian church, "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (I Corinthians 12:3).

But even if we acknowledge the central place of divine activity in Paul's theory of epistemic "credentials," this leaves open alternative ways of understanding God's activity in relation to faith. And how these details are filled out will determine the degree to which the resultant theory of epistemic credentials provides cover from disagreement-motivated religious skepticism. Since Paul does little to fill in these details, I will turn to the example of Jonathan Edwards's religious epistemology as articulated in his 1737 sermon "A Divine and Supernatural Light."⁷ Edwards gives us a detailed theory of epistemic credentials with respect to religious belief that explicitly seeks to accommodate Paul's epistemological commitments. According to Edwards (1995, 111), the action God takes to enable faith in the believer involves imparting to the believer a new perceptual ability, namely, the ability to apprehend "the divine excellency of the things revealed in the Word of God," things which include "the excellency of God, and Jesus Christ, and of the work of redemption, and the ways and works of God revealed in the gospel." Edwards elaborates this further:

There is a divine and superlative glory in these things; an excellency that is of a vastly higher kind, and more sublime nature, than in other things; a glory greatly

⁷ For other discussions of Edwards's epistemology by contemporary philosophers, see (Plantinga 2000, chap. 9) and (Wainwright 1995, chap. 1).

distinguishing them from all that is earthly and temporal. He that is spiritually enlightened truly apprehends and sees it, or has a sense of it. He [does not] merely rationally believe that God is glorious, but he has a sense of the gloriousness of God in his heart. There is not only a rational belief that God is holy, and that holiness is a good thing, but there is a sense of the loveliness of God's holiness. There is not only a speculatively judging that God is gracious, but a sense how amiable God is upon that account; or a sense of the beauty of this divine attribute. (1995, 111)

Edwards does not think that God directly reveals the *truth* of the gospel. Rather, God reveals the beauty of the gospel and the character of God depicted in the gospel. Upon perceiving this beauty, Edwards thinks that it is a quick and natural step to conclude that the gospel is a divine product and is in fact true (113-14). Edwards further contends that apart from this special perceptual gift, knowledge and intellectual abilities will not by themselves reliably lead to faith. While some very minimal abilities for "*ratiocination*" are needed to judge that the gospel is true, those who are especially intelligent, informed, or insightful (in their conventional senses) are no more reliable in their estimation of the gospel than those of more typical abilities (122). One is qualified to assess the truth of the gospel only if one has received from God an apprehension of the excellency of divine things depicted in the gospel.

Is Edwards's theory of epistemic credentials self-favoring? It is certainly *possible* that there could be many thoughtful and intelligent people who legitimately apprehend the glory and beauty of the things depicted in the gospel while nonetheless concluding that one or more essential teachings of the gospel is false. Perhaps they think that a non-divine source is a better explanation for the gospel, despite the exceeding beauty of the picture depicted by the gospel, arriving at this conclusion because they are convinced by a putative proof of God's nonexistence. And such individuals would, even by the lights of Edwards's religious epistemology, be as qualified as Christian believers to reliably assess the gospel's truth. In such a situation, therefore, the Christian would have strong reason to judge that his disputants are as qualified as his fellow Christians and this would give him good reason for doubting his Christian beliefs. But this situation, where many nonbelievers fully apprehend the genuine *goodness* of the reality depicted in the gospel yet fail to believe, seems quite unlikely. For many of the reasons for not believing in Christianity that are often cited by non-Christians depend on a negative evaluative judgment of reality as it is depicted in the Christian gospel; in other words, these reasons depend on one's thinking that some aspect of that gospel is *not* in fact good and glorious and worthy of a perfect God. For example, for one to reasonably conclude from the nature and scope of evil that God does not exist, one must judge that, if God did exist, God could have and should have acted in a way that would result in there being less evil than we actually observe. And such a judgment at least sits uneasily with the judgment that the divine things depicted in the gospel are exceedingly glorious and beautiful. For in this gospel God is depicted as having created *this very world* that is so full of suffering. It seems unlikely that one could judge that this God is unspeakably beautiful and glorious while also thinking that God could have and should have done better. Similarly, many reasons for rejecting Christianity in particular (rather than theism more generally) depend on judgments that a perfect God would have done better than what God is portrayed as having done in the Christian story: God would have revealed Godself more widely and more clearly, would not have become a human being, would not have singled out a particular nation as "special," would not have an innocent person die on a cross for the sins of the guilty, etc.

Again, such judgments do not sit easily with the belief that the divine plan recounted in the gospel is exceedingly glorious and beautiful.

So even if one's apprehending the beauty and glory of the gospel does not preclude the possibility of disbelief, as long as some people base their disbelief partly on negative evaluative judgments about God's character and actions as depicted in the gospel, then we can safely say that someone who possesses the perceptual insight postulated in Edwards's theory of epistemic credentials is less likely to reject the gospel than someone who does not possess this putative insight. It is clear, then, that the epistemic credential that figures centrally in Edwards's religious epistemology is a *partisan* credential: without relying on any view concerning the truth or plausibility of Christianity, we can conclude that someone with this "credential" is more likely to believe Christian claims than someone without it. And the less likely it is that those who possess this credential will reject Christian claims, the less likely it is that Edwards's theory will give Christians a strong reason for thinking that those who disagree with them are epistemically qualified. Thus, the more partisan the credentials postulated by a given theory, the more self-favoring that theory will be.

The self-favoring nature of Edwards's theory of epistemic credentials is not limited to the fact that the credential it emphasizes is partisan. The theory is also self-favoring because this credential is relatively opaque. To see this, imagine that a Christian who takes himself to apprehend the glory and excellence of the gospel encounters some thoughtful and educated atheists who claim (truly) that they also apprehend this glory and excellence but that they nonetheless judge that theism and Christianity are false. While Edwards's theory implies that these atheists are epistemically qualified, given that they do in fact apprehend the excellence of the gospel, one natural reaction on the part of the Christian might be to doubt whether these atheists really do, as claimed, possess the same apprehension of this excellence that he himself does. This doubt need not be based on the possibility that the atheists are lying, but could stem from a suspicion that the atheists are mistaking some other kind of judgment for a perceptual apprehension of the gospel's excellence. Perhaps, for example, the atheists do not directly see that the gospel is excellent, but have arrived at this conclusion by means of inference from other evaluative facts. And such inferential knowledge of the gospel's goodness might be less epistemically forceful and less illuminating than the direct perception. But whether or not the Christian has such a clearly articulated basis for his doubt, it is clear that whether someone has in fact apprehended the excellence of the gospel is a fact that cannot be as definitively confirmed as one's possession of many other types of epistemic qualifications (e.g., academic degrees, a good track record, or raw intelligence). If indeed the Christian cannot confidently confirm that any particular non-Christian has truly perceived the gospel's excellence, then this credential is opaque. And if the credential is opaque, then the Christian will never be certain that some given disputant possesses the credential. And if one is uncertain whether or not one's disputant has a certain epistemic credential, one obviously has less reason for thinking that disputant qualified than one would have if one could be certain that he possessed the credential. Therefore, if one accepts a theory of epistemic credentials that places importance on opaque credentials, the strength of the reasons one has for trusting one's disputants will always be limited. Such theories are self-favoring in the following negative sense: they are unlikely to give one a strong positive reason for trusting the views of one's disputants.

Religious theories of epistemic credentials that feature partisan and opaque credentials will be less likely to give believers a strong reason for trusting the opinions of their disputants

than more standard theories featuring credentials that are non-partisan and transparent. Just how self-favoring a religious theory of epistemic credentials is will of course depend on its specific claims. But it certainly cannot be assumed in an argument for religious skepticism that most religious believers should, even by the lights of their own religious views, take themselves to have highly qualified disputants. Given the self-favoring nature of many religious theories of epistemic credentials, such an assumption would be highly questionable and in need of significant justification.⁸

6. A MORE DEMANDING MODERATE VIEW?

Against the argument developed thus far, one might object that the moderate position I have taken from Christensen is unnecessarily weak in its conciliatory requirements. For I have been supposing (with Christensen 2011, 17) that very weak dispute-independent grounds for trusting my disputants' views will not be sufficient to generate substantial conciliatory pressure. But even if we grant that the skeptical pressure generated by a disagreement correlates with the strength of my independent reasons for trusting my disputants, it may be that weak independent reasons for such trust *are* sufficient to generate significant skeptical pressure in cases where I lack any countervailing *partisan* reasons for preferring my side of the dispute.⁹ Perhaps what explains the lack of conciliatory pressure in the *Stars Tell All* case is not only the weakness of my dispute-independent reasons for trusting my disputant, but also the strength of my partisan reasons for thinking that my disputant's epistemic qualifications are inferior to my own. It's plausible to suppose that absent such partisan reasons for preferring my own view, weak independent reasons for trusting my disputant would be enough to require significant conciliation. There is, then, space for a version of moderate conciliationism that is more demanding in its conciliatory requirements than the version we have been considering. And if this more demanding moderate conciliationism is correct, then more will be required of theist Terry if she is to justifiably remain confident in the face of religious disagreement. In order to resist the disagreement threat, it will not be enough that Terry *lacks* any reason for thinking that her atheist disputants are as epistemically qualified as the theists; rather, she will need some sufficiently strong positive reason (whether a partisan reason provided by *T* or some dispute-independent reason) for thinking that her side is more qualified.

I believe this demanding moderate conciliationism (DMC) has much to commend it. But DMC is unlikely to underwrite religious skepticism. First, it is questionable whether DMC is significantly more demanding in its conciliatory requirements than the moderate view we have been considering thus far. For it seems that in any dispute one will have at least *some* partisan reasons for preferring one's own side in a dispute. One can always, for example, reason as follows: "Since my disputant fails to see that the evidence supports *p*, I have good reason for thinking that my disputant is not as qualified and reliable with respect to the question of *p*'s plausibility as I previously thought; therefore I should not be very worried

⁸ For someone who has taken a step in this direction, see Frances (2008). Unfortunately, space does not permit me to engage Frances here.

⁹ Thanks to Tom Kelly for drawing my attention to this alternative.

about the fact that she disagrees with me.”¹⁰ If this type of “crude” partisan reasoning is sufficient to outweigh very weak independent reasons for trusting one’s disputant, then there is little reason to think that DMC is much more demanding than the moderate conciliationism tentatively sketched by Christensen. For DMC to have more conciliatory bite than Christensen’s proposal, one must maintain that such crude partisan reasoning is not sufficient to block the conciliatory pressure exerted by weak independent reasons for thinking my disputants comparably qualified. Or, if it is allowed that crude partisan reasoning does suffice to outweigh weak independent reasons in certain types of disagreements (e.g., those where the rational import of the evidence is especially clear), one must maintain that in at least some types of disagreements more sophisticated partisan reasoning will be required—reasoning that does not only conclude *that* my disputant is less reliable than myself, but that gives some explanatory account as to *why* this is the case.

If we suppose both that DMC is correct and that crude partisan reasoning cannot (at least in religious disagreements) provide sufficient grounds for resisting weak dispute-independent reasons for trusting one’s disputants, then the skeptical significance of religious disagreements will be greater than suggested above. For on this supposition, the fact that a religiously-motivated theory of epistemic credentials places heavy emphasis on opaque credentials will not by itself provide any resistance to the skeptical threat of religious disagreement. If Terry’s theory of epistemic credentials heavily weights opaque credentials, she will have very little basis for thinking that her disputants are highly qualified. But she will not thereby have a reason for thinking that her side of the dispute *is* highly qualified. She might be completely in the dark as to who possesses the relevant qualifications and who does not. And without any independent or (non-crude) partisan basis for thinking that her side is more qualified, DMC would require significant conciliation.

But even if DMC is correct, we can still affirm that religious views that place significant weight on partisan credentials will enjoy significant protection from the skeptical threat of disagreement. For if some credential *C* posited by belief system *B* is partisan, then we have reason to think that those who affirm *B* are more likely to possess *C* than those who deny *B*. And this isn’t a crude partisan reason that moves directly from an opinion about what the evidence supports to a conclusion that one’s disputants are not qualified, but is rather reasoning which helps to *explain* the disagreement by identifying a (putative) credential that is likely to be possessed to a greater degree by proponents of *B*. Moreover, while opacity by itself may not provide resistance to disagreement-motivated skepticism, the opacity of credentials can function to bolster the disagreement-resistance conferred by partisan credentials. If *C* is partisan, we have an initial reason for thinking that someone who disputes *B* is less likely to possess *C* than someone who affirms *B*; but that reason could be defeated if we discover that a good portion of those who dispute *B* do in fact possess *C*. But if *C* is also opaque, then we will be unable to confirm whether or not such disputants do in fact possess *C*. Thus, the opacity of a partisan credential serves to protect from defeat the judgment that one’s disputants are unlikely to possess the credential.

¹⁰ One motivation for independence principles is the desire to account for the apparent inadequacy of such crude partisan reasoning. See, for example, Christensen (2011, 2).

7. CONCLUSION

I have argued that strong conciliationism is implausible in supposing that dispute-independent reasoning ought to entirely determine the skeptical significance one assigns to a particular disagreement. The only plausible conciliationism is a moderate version that holds that the skeptical significance of a disagreement positively correlates with the strength of one's independent reasons for trusting one's disputants. Because religious believers often have religiously-motivated and highly non-standard views concerning the epistemic credentials relevant to religious questions, their basis for an independent assessment of epistemic credentials will typically be highly attenuated and as such will likely generate at most weak reasons for trusting their disputants. Moreover, because a religious believer's own theory of epistemic credentials will frequently feature partisan and opaque credentials, an evaluation of epistemic credentials based on such a theory will often deliver a verdict that is favorable to the believer.

One natural reaction at this point might be to concede that some religious theories of epistemic credentials provide some protection (perhaps significant protection) from disagreement-motivated skepticism, but to insist that these religious views on epistemic credentials are simply implausible. The *reasonable* religious believer, it might be claimed, will accept a more standard view of epistemic credentials, even with respect to religious questions. So it is at least true that, for the *reasonable* person, moderate conciliationism will prescribe religious skepticism. While this may be true, arguing for this conclusion would likely require going beyond mere epistemological considerations in order to engage the theological and religious reasons that lead religious believers to accept non-standard theories of epistemic qualifications in the first place. Moreover, the view that religiously-motivated theories of epistemic credentials are unreasonable could itself be threatened by moderate conciliationism if it turns out that many religious believers (including many who appear to be qualified according to standard criteria) continue to stick by their non-standard theories even after considering the arguments lodged against them.¹¹

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¹¹ This paper was presented at a philosophy of religion group and an epistemology seminar at Yale, and at the Killeen Chair Conference on Religious Disagreement at St. Norbert College. I am grateful for the feedback I received on these occasions, including that of my commentator at the conference, Timothy Pickavance. John Hare, Keith DeRose, Michael Bergmann, Sun-Joo Shin, and Dale Martin provided useful feedback on earlier drafts. Work on this paper began at the 2011 Purdue Summer Seminar on Perceptual, Moral, and Religious Skepticism. I am grateful to the other participants and to the leader of the seminar, Michael Bergmann, and to the John Templeton Foundation for making the seminar possible through generous financial support.

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