

Theology Q2: If you cannot persuade your intelligent, sympathetic friends to embrace your religious belief system, do you have enough reason to believe what you believe?

In the Sanskrit epic, the *Mahābhārata*, the archer prince Arjuna has a religious revelation in the midst of a war. On day thirteen of the fighting, Lord Krishna reveals himself to Arjuna, showing his *Viśvarūpa*, an entity composed of all creatures in the universe, with innumerable eyes and mouths, advising his aggrieved friend about *Dharma* (or righteousness). Arjuna has witnessed the divine. No one else on the battlefield was privy to the episode. The prince is unable to justify or explain it to anyone, as he was the sole observer. Arjuna continues to fight for the remaining five days, using the teachings imparted by Lord Krishna. The prince believes what happened, even if others do not.

But should he? If those who doubt him are intelligent and sympathetic, is this not reason for Arjuna to doubt himself? Why should he give his own judgement more weight than people who are just as intelligent as he is?

If those who doubted Arjuna were truly his epistemic peers, then he would indeed have reason to doubt himself. But, as I will argue in this essay, they were not his epistemic peers because they had not had his experiences. More generally, in matters of religious belief, those who disagree are almost never epistemic peers. So the disagreement of their intelligent and sympathetic friends does not show them to be unreasonable in their religious beliefs.

An epistemic peer can be defined as follows “Let us say that two individuals are epistemic peers with respect to some question if and only if they satisfy the following two conditions: (i) they are equals with respect to their familiarity with the evidence and arguments which bear on that question, and (ii) they are equals with respect to general epistemic virtues such as intelligence, thoughtfulness and freedom from bias” (Kelly, pp. 174-175). In other words, epistemic peers are likely to be equally good at evaluating a the claim concerned.

Imagine that two students are calculating the average score of the class. As they finish, one answers, “The average is 40, Ma’am.” “No Ma’am, it is 50,” the other interjects. Both know that each is good at mathematics and that they have a track record of scoring the same in tests. Yet they disagree about the average score. Many epistemologists would suggest that in these circumstances the classmates should suspend their judgement, that both of them should be “epistemically humble”. As human reasoning and perceptions are susceptible to error, philosopher David Christensen argues that disagreement with an epistemic peer is an indication that our beliefs may be mistaken and that an individual in this situation should be open to revision (Christensen, pp. 193-194). Philosopher Richard Feldman concludes that one cannot have reasonable religious disagreements: if the disagreeing individuals are epistemic peers, only one of them can be reasonable (Feldman, pp 201-208).

But this does not show religious beliefs or religious disagreement to generally be unreasonable because the disputants are rarely epistemic peers. Even if two people hypothetically share all their evidence, different intuitions can lead to different interpretations. Background beliefs guide an individual in evaluating any experience or evidence. People attesting to different faiths, such as Islam or Hinduism, would analyse a given situation differently based on their background beliefs, even if they make an honest attempt to set aside bias and to communicate their consciously held beliefs to one another. Religious interpretation and comprehension of their faith acquired from a young age has a powerful influence on people’s thought process. Often, people are not even consciously aware of such instilled beliefs. This fact highlights the importance of considering the limited degree to

which evidence can truly be shared, raising questions about the existence of epistemic peers. People can seldom be epistemic peers in a religious disagreement. (King, pp 249-272). Since one's intelligent, sympathetic friends are unlikely to be epistemic peers, it is not unreasonable to believe something they do not.

Regardless of the religious beliefs of our intelligent, sympathetic friends, the question still remains whether we have enough reason to continue believing what we believe? One of the major foundations for belief in specific religious traditions are the accounts of saints and prophets who have had revelatory religious experiences (experiences involving revelation of the divine or of the nature of reality). Almost all religions of the world are substantiated by the narrative of revelatory religious experiences. Debates are often focused on the subjective impressions of individuals and their interpretations, from Arjuna beholding Lord Krishna's *Viśvarūpa* to Mary Magdalene witnessing the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The belief in Jesus Christ rising from the dead is considered the "central mystery of the Christian faith, and contributes to the fundamental theological assumptions of Christianity" (Siniscalchi, pp. 363). Equally convincing and persuasive anecdotes of religious revelations are found in multiple, contradictory faiths. So, on what basis do people believe in God?

Gary Gutting justifies belief in some form of God by the fact that people all over the world have beliefs in and perceptions of guidance by a benevolent force or God. This perception is a deeply rooted aspect of human culture and history, characterised by a profound feeling of connection and is found in diverse traditions throughout the world, thus providing evidence for God in general. Yet, it does not support a distinct religion, raising questions regarding the basis for commitment to one's own tradition as there are other traditions that have equally strong claims (Mavrodes, pp 440-443).

Gutting argues that one cannot have complete confidence in one's own beliefs, but should rather maintain "interim beliefs" in one's religious tradition. Interim beliefs are beliefs which are held provisionally, requiring further investigation. They are accepted as true, but with a caveat. Such stances are subject to change if new evidence is found during disagreements and debates. Still, it is rational to hold opinions *pro tempore* around issues that are epistemologically indeterminate. In other words, interim beliefs should be applied when it is not possible to conclusively prove or disprove a certain notion (Mavrodes, pp 440-443).

Gutting argues that methodological conservatism can form the basis of maintaining interim beliefs in one's own tradition; one should accept their current faith until it is corroborated or contradicted by further evidence (Mavrodes, pp 440- 443). With respect to the status quo, this means that one should not discard their faith simply because it is difficult to verify or prove. Instead, one should engage with the data that support it and remain open to counter-arguments. While it appears that no religious dogma can be shown to be accurate, it is not irrational to embrace such convictions as provisional beliefs. As Gutting notes, individuals may have many opinions for which they cannot reasonably acquire sufficient evidence. Hence, it is appropriate to apply the same standard to religion as well, making it reasonable to hold interim beliefs (Gutting, p. 102). Gutting also suggests that "the interest of truth would be more effectively served by [disagreements] than by a general withdrawal from commitment on issues of contention" (Ibid.). Therefore, the most sensible course to take is to allow differing beliefs, even when epistemically indeterminate, rather than confining oneself to a single more general credo (Ibid).

Diverse religious beliefs foster a richer, more complex view of the world. People who participate in debate and discussion are compelled to weigh different viewpoints and analyse their own ideas. This results in a better understanding of religion and fosters an appreciation of human behaviour and different cultural systems, promoting tolerance and liberality. By engaging with diverse religious

beliefs, we build a more tolerant and harmonious society where people of many backgrounds can coexist.

An additional reason to maintain one's religious beliefs is the psychological benefits they provide. Religion provides humans psychological relief and comfort. It gives them a sense of meaning and guides them to follow the righteous path, even if they lack conclusive reasons to believe it. Faith gives a sense of hope and purpose in life, offering comfort for those who are going through difficulties. It is the feeling of having someone watching your back, like a guardian angel. Places of worship are thronged by devotees seeking solace. If religion allows these benefits, perhaps that alone is enough reason to be an adherent.

There has been and always will be religious disagreement among people. It is unreasonable to expect two individuals to have identical beliefs simply because they are intelligent and sympathetic. In fact, the very qualities that make individuals intelligent and sympathetic can lead to differing views and beliefs. Each person has their own unique perspective, including different intuitions and background beliefs which make it difficult to fully share this perspective with others.

Ultimately, it is irrelevant whether one can persuade others of one's belief system; it should be based on one's own understanding and convictions. Hence, if I cannot persuade my intelligent, sympathetic friends to embrace my religious belief system, I may still have enough reason to believe what I believe.

References

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