Voices From the Edge
Centring Marginalized Perspectives in Analytic Theology

Edited by Michelle Panchuk and Michael Rea
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Edited by

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To

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and
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Seeking out Epistemic Friction in the Philosophy of Religion

Helen De Cruz

As a practice, philosophy of religion is characterized by two features relevant for social epistemologists. The first is *arbitrariness*. Philosophers of religion hold religious beliefs (or lack of religious beliefs) as a result of factors beyond their control, such as where they were born or the education they enjoyed. This arbitrariness is not unique for religious beliefs. It also plays a role in how other beliefs are shaped, but it nevertheless has occupied a prominent place in discussions on the justification of religious beliefs, as I will discuss below. The second is *disagreement*. Philosophers of religion find themselves frequently disagreeing with their interlocutors, not only fellow philosophers but also people from their wider community, including family, friends, and colleagues. Moreover, as they are keenly aware, religious disagreement is widespread and frequently occurs between interlocutors who seem similar in how thoughtful and diligent they are, and in the evidence they have access to—these are often referred to as epistemic peers (see e.g., Kelly 2005; Feldman 2007; Elga 2007; Christensen 2011).

The fact that our religious beliefs are tightly linked to circumstances of our birth and upbringing, and the fact that we find ourselves in disagreement with thoughtful interlocutors, are often presented as *problems*. We would merely need to find the right doxastic attitude to adopt in light of these bodies of second-order evidence. The literature on peer disagreement has focused on the question of what attitude is rationally permitted or required in the light of a disclosed disagreement with a dissenting peer. Concilitionists tend to hold that disagreement requires belief revision in a range of circumstances (e.g., Feldman 2007). At the very least we should become less confident about our religious convictions, and perhaps we should suspend judgement altogether. Proponents of steadfastness, on the other hand, think disagreement does not require us to change our credences or suspend judgement. For example, one might claim some special insight that is not readily shareable with a peer (van Inwagen 1996). In a discussion that is quite analogous to the peer disagreement literature, authors who examine the problem of arbitrariness ask whether it is permissible for two agents to adopt different doxastic attitudes, given a particular body of evidence.
Proponents of uniqueness (e.g., White 2014: 312) think this is not permissible, but instead hold that ‘there is just one rationally permissible doxastic attitude one can take, given a particular body of evidence.’ By contrast, permissivists (e.g., Schoenfield 2014) hold there is more leeway, and that in many cases two agents can rationally hold differing doxastic attitudes about a proposition,¹ even when they have access to identical bodies of evidence.

This focus on doxastic attitudes comes at a cost: we neglect the broader epistemic landscape in which our beliefs are shaped, and how features of that landscape influence positions we come to endorse and defend. If one treats the presence of thoughtful dissenters only as a problem to be solved, rather than as an opportunity, then it would seem one could increase one’s justification merely by surrounding oneself with people who have similar points of view, or by shutting out dissent (Kelly 2005). This is not to say religious disagreement doesn’t pose challenges. It does, because it raises questions about the legitimacy of our beliefs. Moreover, I do not deny that the traditional response to it, laying down epistemic norms, is important—after all, we do need to know whether our beliefs are legitimate. But if this is our only response, we miss the bigger picture of what we can learn by harnessing epistemic differences to our advantage.

There are alternative approaches to disagreement, for example, William James’ (1920) melioristic pluralism, or Helen Longino’s (1991) concept of scientific objectivity, which look at disagreement as a welcome source of knowledge. This paper examines how the epistemic landscape in philosophy of religion is formed, and what we can learn from this. Rather than focusing on the rationality of doxastic attitudes in the light of disclosed disagreement and arbitrariness, I want to examine how philosophers of religion, as socially engaged beings, can turn a fuller consideration of disagreement and arbitrariness to their advantage. I am concerned with questions that are at the heart of regulative epistemology: how can we improve our learning from others, and how can we improve our social epistemic environment? My main argument is that a deliberate seeking out of epistemic friction benefits philosophers of religion, and I indicate ways in which this can be achieved.

The concept of epistemic friction appears in, among others, José Medina (2013) and Gila Sher (2010). Sher (2010) sees a precursor of this concept in Kant, who faulted metaphysicians for not being sufficiently engaged with the external world as it affects us through our senses and cognitive apparatus. Medina (2013) sees epistemic friction primarily in social terms, for instance, when people from a dominant social or racial group are confronted with the perspective of marginalized people. Epistemic friction provides us with constraints but also with freedom, because it broadens our conceptual space. This is captured aptly in Kant’s dove metaphor:

¹ For work on the relationship between conciliationism and uniqueness, see for example, Ballantyne and Coffman (2012) and De Cruz (2019).
The light dove, in free flight cutting through the air the resistance of which it feels, could get the idea that it could do even better in airless space. Likewise, Plato abandoned the world of the senses because it posed so many hindrances for the understanding, and dared to go beyond it on the wings of the ideas, in the empty space of pure understanding. He did not notice that he made no headway by his efforts, for he had no resistance [Widerstand], no support, as it were, by which he could stiffen himself, and to which he could apply his powers in order to get his understanding off the ground. (A5/B9, 129) (Kant 1781 [2005])

Here I am primarily concerned with social origins of epistemic friction, marginalized viewpoints within academic philosophy of religion. Engaging with these could help philosophers to make headway in their efforts, by providing a rich range of intellectual options and considerations that they can apply their powers to. I draw attention to the structural features of academic philosophy that have resulted in a distorted epistemic landscape. While this paper is primarily concerned with philosophy of religion, it also has ramifications for religious belief formation by non-experts.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 1 examines arbitrariness and disagreement in the philosophy of religion, drawing on my earlier work in experimental philosophy of religion. This work shows that philosophers of religion, like people more generally, come to their religious views as a result of a variety of factors outside of their control, such as the religious beliefs of their parents. I then argue that the demographics of philosophy of religion give rise to a skewed epistemic landscape, which privileges some religious views over others, especially Christianity and atheist naturalism. Section 2 shows that because of these skewed demographics, the epistemic landscape in which philosophers operate is distorted. I propose that epistemic friction can help us improve our epistemic situation. Section 3 considers objections based on epistemic partiality, imaginative resistance, and promoting oppressive views. I argue that none of these responses negates the call for seeking out epistemic friction. Section 4 concludes by sketching how philosophers of religion could broaden their range of philosophical views.

1. Disagreement and Arbitrariness: Results from Experimental Philosophy

1.1 Picking out the Rotten Apples?

Descartes (1641 [1996]) considered someone who has never engaged in philosophy before; this person would hold many unexamined beliefs, accumulated since childhood. He thought that one ought to critically examine these preconceptions as one would sift through apples in a basket, throwing out the rotten ones and
keeping only the ones that are sound: ‘Now the best way they can accomplish this is to reject all their beliefs together in one go, as if they were all uncertain and false. They can then go over each belief in turn and re-adopt only those which they recognize to be true and indubitable’ (seventh set of objections and replies, CSM II, 324) (Descartes 1641 [1984]). Coming from a different tradition, the Muslim philosopher al-Ghazālī (c.1100 [1952], 21) saw that children tend to grow up endorsing the beliefs of their parents. This observation led him to critically question his own assumptions, as he declared, ‘inherited beliefs lost their grip upon me, for I saw that Christian youths always grew up to be Christians, Jewish youths to be Jews and Muslim youths to be Muslims.’

Both Descartes and al-Ghazālī thought that philosophers ought not to unthinkingly accept the beliefs they acquired throughout their childhood and education. The very fact that those beliefs were acquired through tradition and testimonial transmission made them suspect. Although analytic philosophers have recently warmed to testimony as a potential source of knowledge, many of them still tend to operate with the assumption that the view from nowhere is achievable—an objective, dispassionate view that abstracts away from our lived circumstances and experiences, including disability, gender, class, sexual orientation, and religious beliefs (see Panchuk 2020, for critical discussion). But this assumption is coming increasingly under scrutiny from fields such as feminist philosophy, social epistemology, and the philosophies of race and gender. In the related field of theology, queer, womanist, and feminist theologies draw attention to the problem of epistemic injustice, where people by virtue of their gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity are not accorded a fair hearing to their testimony. Recently, experimental philosophy has called into question the extent to which philosophical reflection can pull us away from our unexamined views. For example, empirical evidence (e.g., Schwitzgebel & Cushman 2015) suggests that philosophers are subject to framing effects when thinking about ethical dilemmas. I will here review evidence that philosophers of religion are also subject to non-epistemic influences in forming their beliefs.

1.2 How Home and Educational Background Influence Philosophers of Religion

The context in which philosophers grow up and receive their education has a profound influence on their subsequent intellectual trajectory. In a survey consisting of open questions (De Cruz 2018), I asked philosophers of religion (N = 134) to reflect on the influences that led them to specialize in this philosophical subdiscipline, ‘Can you tell something about the factors that contributed to your specializing in philosophy of religion?’ Two independent coders categorized the responses, and the findings are summarized below (in
percentage of respondents, Figure 1.1). The most important factor was personal religious belief, which was cited by 36 per cent of respondents, for example ‘I am a Catholic, and philosophy of religion helps me in deepening my faith by way of—paradoxically—putting the faith itself into question and even criticizing it.’ Pure philosophical interest only came second (at 33.1 per cent), and education, such as an inspiring professor during one’s undergraduate years, came third (at 20.1 per cent). There are limits to self-report, but, if anything, we might expect philosophers to under-report such influences on their philosophical work, for instance, because they are unaware of possible factors that influence their thinking.

I obtained similar results in a focus group study that I conducted with academic philosophers of religion from under-represented demographics (De Cruz 2020). Members of the two focus groups discussed their experiences in the discipline and the factors that led them to decide to specialize in philosophy of religion. All of them came from religious backgrounds (including the atheist and agnostic philosophers). For example, one participant, Chris² (an African American Associate Professor in the US) recounted how he fell from faith due to various circumstances, but also noted that his work in philosophy of religion was still informed by his personal experiences:

One respect in which my personal beliefs led to the work that I’m doing, it was for me the loss of the religious faith and my being troubled by that initially and

² ‘Chris’ is a pseudonym, as are all the names of participants in this study.
wanting to reconnect with and understand the value of what I had that led to some of the questions that I’m now talking about in philosophy of religion. But also I think that the work that I’ve done in philosophy of religion has helped me get some peace about my own agnosticism. I feel that I have a better understanding of what was important to me about my earlier religious practice and I’ve been able to rejoin a religious community and focus on those things—like going to church again, for example, and I feel like I’ve been able to do that wholeheartedly and find it valuable in part because I have a better understanding of things through working through some of these issues.

I probed the source of disagreement among academic philosophers about religious beliefs in several studies. One study asked academic philosophers (N = 802, at least graduate student level) to evaluate arguments for or against theism in terms of their strength from 1 to 5 (De Cruz 2014; De Cruz & De Smedt 2016). There were eight arguments for theism (generically presented as ‘cosmological argument’, ‘design argument’, ‘argument from religious experience’, etc.; they were not spelled out), and eight arguments against theism (presented as ‘argument from evil’, ‘argument from lack of evidence’, ‘argument from divine hiddenness’, etc.). Adding up the scores of the eight arguments for theism yields a possible highest score of 40 (if a participant finds all eight arguments maximally compelling) and a lowest score of 8 (if a participant finds all eight arguments very weak), the same is true for the eight arguments against theism.

Theists, atheists, and agnostics differed in how strong they found these arguments. Unsurprisingly, theists found arguments for theism stronger, whereas atheists found arguments against theism stronger. Agnostics occupied an intermediate position but on average found the arguments against theism stronger than the arguments for. Mean scores are summarized in Figure 1.2.

As these arguments were not spelled out, these numbers have their limitations. For instance, it is conceivable that on average theists have in mind a stronger version of the cosmological argument than atheists. To control for this possibility, Kevin Tobia (2016) presented two modal ontological arguments to his participants, one for theism and one against theism, which were structurally very similar: the theistic version argued that it is possible that there is a being with maximal greatness, and therefore, necessarily, there exists a being with maximal greatness. The argument against theism was almost identical, but stated that it is possible that there is not a being with maximal greatness, and therefore, necessarily, there does not exist a being with maximal greatness. Tobia confirmed that participants, who were either philosophers of religion or theologians, were influenced by their religious beliefs. Theists rated the theistic modal ontological argument more positively, atheists rated the atheistic one more positively. Moreover, theists were more inclined to hold that the theistic modal ontological argument was logically valid, compared to atheists and agnostics. These effects held even when
controlling for expertise (whether participants held a PhD or only a Master’s degree).

These numbers do not reveal the direction of causation: it might be the case that the perceived strength of arguments against theism led former theists to become atheists, or that the perceived strength of arguments for theism helped persuade former atheists to adopt theism. But in my qualitative survey (De Cruz 2018) I found that arguments only occasionally played a role in conversion, and that straight-out conversions were rare. Here is an example,

In the beginning of my studies in philosophy of religion, I was an atheist (at least in the sense of lacking belief in God). I investigated many many arguments for and against the existence of God. I discovered that my initial impression of “the” arguments was overly simplistic… In the end (or the next beginning), the arguments for God seemed to win out, and so I began to lean toward belief in God. As I’ve progressed further in philosophy, I seemed to find many reasons to think God exists, and the reasons against God seemed less persuasive. Of course, I’m aware of the problem of polarization, and so I try to keep testing various arguments and listening to those who see things differently… rechecking the arguments.—male assistant professor, research-oriented university, United States.³

³ I did not collect data on ethnicity for this study, only gender, geographic location, and academic rank/position.
For the most part, someone’s religious home background played a large role, and conversions, especially conversions prompted by rational argument, were relatively rare. Philosophers of religion do not differ from other people in this respect; conversions often occur as a result of non-epistemic factors, such as a desire to belong to one’s social group, friendship, or romantic attachments (see e.g. Kox, Meeus, & Hart 1991; Kelley & De Graaf 1997, for studies on religious identification and conversion as a result of primarily non-epistemic factors).

2. The Epistemic Landscape of Philosophy of Religion

2.1 The Value of Actual Disagreement

Suppose that you and I argue. If you get the better of me, and not I of you, are you then really right and am I really wrong? If I get the better of you and not you of me, then am I really right and you really wrong... Whom shall we ask to decide? If we ask someone who agrees with you, how could he judge correctly, since he already agrees with you? If we ask someone who agrees with me, how could he judge? If we ask someone who disagrees with both of us? If neither you nor I nor others can decide, shall we then wait for yet another?

(Zhuangzi, Höchsmann and Yang [3rd century] 2016: Book 2, 96)

This brief thought experiment in the Zhuangzi points to key problems of an epistemology of disagreement that ignores the broader epistemic landscape in which we form our beliefs. If we focus narrowly on the contents of our beliefs, without due consideration of how we came to those beliefs, the philosophy of disagreement risks becoming a numbers game. We could simply tilt the numbers in our favour by surrounding ourselves by like-minded people, exemplified in the extreme by Kelly’s (2005) tyrannical dictator who kills everyone who does not agree with him. Also, by focusing on whether the credences of my interlocutor align with my own (in Zhuangzi’s thought experiment), I am not really looking for a range of views, which could potentially enrich my perspective and help me think about unexplored possibilities. I’m just looking at whether their views align with mine. Seeking out differing opinions, in such a view, would reduce my justification for any belief I held, whereas surrounding myself with like-minded people would increase it.

Moreover, the psychological literature shows that diversity consistently trumps ability in problem-solving tasks presented to groups. For example, diverse groups of problem-solvers beat more homogeneous higher ability groups when working on focused solutions (Hong & Page 2004). A naturalistic study analysed a series of 166 broadcast searches, where firms invited teams of scientists to come up with
solutions to specific research and development problems, i.e., specific engineering and design problems that scientific teams can solve (Jeppesen & Lakhani 2010). A total of over 12,000 scientists competed in these searches. The data indicate that teams composed of so-called ‘marginal’ individuals, who were either technically marginal (i.e., in a field removed from the problem at hand), or socially marginal (i.e., from a low-prestige institution, or being a female STEM scientist, as female scientists usually had less social clout within scientific communities) were significantly more likely to find a solution to these problems than more centrally located individuals. As Jeppesen and Lakhani (2010) note, being socially marginal comes with significant disadvantages such as lack of resources, isolation, lack of access to information, but different perspectives and greater inherent diversity (elite institutions tend to be more demographically homogeneous, e.g., white, upper class) have epistemic advantages. Such experiments in business and science settings cohere with the observation in feminist standpoint epistemology (e.g., Harding 1991) that being socially disadvantaged may offer unique epistemic advantages. The epistemology of disagreement, which still for the most part focuses on idealized epistemic peers who are almost homogeneous by definition (for instance, who have access to the same evidence or who are cognitive equals), does not address, let alone explain, the dynamics of superior performance of more diverse groups of individuals.

Disagreement should be situated in a broader epistemic landscape, which consists of those features of our social and natural environment that are relevant for belief formation. An epistemic landscape can exhibit various degrees of hostility or congeniality to good epistemic practices or knowledge acquisition. An epistemically benign landscape has features that are conducive to our acquiring desirable epistemic states, such as understanding, knowledge, or accurate beliefs. By contrast, an epistemically hostile landscape has features that make it difficult for learners to acquire epistemically desirable states. Such features of the epistemic landscape can help us understand why, for example, children routinely acquire knowledge—including propositional knowledge and skills—through testimony in spite of not being epistemically vigilant. This is because children are usually surrounded by benevolent testifiers such as parents and teachers. By contrast, an epistemically hostile landscape has features such that even an epistemically virtuous person can fail to acquire knowledge. Katherine Furman (2018) provides the example of state-endorsed denialism that HIV would cause AIDS. The South African President Thabo Mbeki supported fringe scientists who also argued that retroviral drugs (that prevent the virus from replicating) were toxic. Members of Mbeki’s party, the ANC (African National Congress), who privately disagreed with the president, remained silent. The ANC enjoyed a high

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⁴ I will here focus on knowledge as a desirable epistemic state we can acquire, including in the religious domain.
degree of trust, leading people to believe that AIDS was not transmitted through HIV. This prevented the adoption of retroviral drugs, leading to over 300,000 preventable deaths. Furman’s example demonstrates that lack of dissent can be caused by insidious factors, such as the deliberate silencing of others. Thus, an epistemic landscape can look homogeneous but nevertheless be hostile because the homogeneity can have sinister causes such as state-endorsed denialism. The homogeneity can also be part of an epistemically benign landscape, for example, the clear information children get in a school environment. The underlying causes for lack (or presence) of dissent thus matter in evaluating whether an epistemic landscape is knowledge-conducive.

The problem of actual disagreement is distinct from possible disagreement. If disagreement is reducible to a form of higher-order evidence, without actually taking into account interpersonal dynamics, it would seem that we should not only take into account actual disagreement, but also possible dissenters we might never encounter. Nathan Ballantyne (2014: 374), for example, countenances not only actual philosophers you disagree with, but also counterfactual philosophers you might possibly disagree with: ‘But how can we hold onto our opinions while we recognize full well that counterfactual philosophers very likely would offer us reasons to abandon them?’, he asks. For the domain of religion, J.L. Schellenberg (2013) draws on observations of deep time and evolution to argue that the range of possible religious beliefs humans might entertain is far from exhausted. Given that religion is very recent in evolutionary terms, who knows what our species might come up with in the future? Schellenberg exhorts readers to become less dogmatic in the light of this.

Furman (2018) thinks that actual disagreement has priority over mere possible disagreement, because the latter would lead to an unacceptable scepticism. She favours a closer attention to voices that have been silenced. Is there agreement that $p$ because people have carefully considered it, or is there agreement that $p$ because people who believe that not-$p$ have been pushed out of the discipline? These are two very different situations, because they tell us something about features of the epistemic landscape. There is another pragmatic reason for favouring actual over mere possible disagreement: if we think of disagreement as a source of improvement, it is unclear how entertaining mere possible disagreement would provide useful epistemic friction. A possible, counterfactual philosopher lacks substance—a ghost without well-developed philosophical ideas, without lived experiences that might influence her work.

By contrast, the actual philosopher, particularly from an under-represented religious tradition or non-dominant demographic, can be engaged with and can help us be grounded. She might have insights as a result of Duboisian double consciousness. Du Bois (1903 [2007]: 8) defined double consciousness as ‘this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity’, in other
words, a black person sees herself both from her own point of view and from the point of view of the majority white population. It is a negative feeling as it is a sense of being divided from oneself. However, Du Bois recommended a merging of the two perspectives that does not deny either one. Medina (2013) argues that double consciousness provides potential epistemic advantages: by virtue of their social status, minorities (gender, ethnic, sexual orientation, class, etc.) have to simultaneously consider their own point of view, and how people of the majority conceive of it. Similarly, philosophers of religion who are not Christians and not atheists need to be conscious of their own views, as well as of how other people in the discipline view them. This provides opportunities for insight about how there are alternative ways of perceiving a particular religious position which are not as readily available to people who work in a majority religious tradition. In my focus group study with minorities in philosophy of religion (De Cruz 2020), I found that philosophers with minority religious views exhibit this double consciousness. For example, Zahra, a female philosopher of religion who is also a Shia Muslim, found it challenging to engage in a critical fashion with Islam without thereby further ostracizing or reinforcing stereotypes about that religion (as woman-unfriendly):

And so as a woman or as a Shia Muslim, but particularly as a woman, how do you push on the boundaries within religion or how do you talk about religious issues as a believer without ostracizing that religion within the bigger society?

Likewise, David, a Jewish philosopher of religion, always has in the back of his mind how his mainly Christian audience would react to what he writes:

I’ve noticed that I, as a Jewish philosopher, working in this space, where most of my readers are either going to be Christians or naturalistic atheists, is that I end up almost subconsciously tailoring what I’m writing to a Christian audience. That is to say, I’m thinking, how might Jewish conceptions of atonement be interesting to Christians, who spend all this time thinking about atonement? And had I not been to loads of Christian conferences on the atonement, I might never have even thought about Jewish conceptions of atonement . . . I’m not saying it as a negative thing, I’m very grateful to my Christian colleagues for what I’ve learned from them, but being a minority religious identity within this milieu, it just has as a consequence that you find yourself tailoring what you write and how you speak to the majority.

But David also felt he had to take care that his writing is presented as distinctively Jewish:

‘a Christian could have said it just as well, or a Muslim could just as well’. So, on the one hand we’re trying to tailor and cater ourselves to our mainly Christian
audience, but on the other hand, we’re also very eager to make sure that we must pepper our document with enough quotes from the Midrash otherwise . . . a Christian could have written it! I don’t think my Christian colleagues have that kind of worry.

2.2 Demographics in Philosophy of Religion

The epistemic landscape of philosophy of religion does not reflect the broader intellectual landscape of religious viewpoints, even if we restrict ourselves to the Western cultures in which these departments are situated. Philosophy of religion is overwhelmingly focused on Christian theism and naturalistic atheism, at the expense of other religious belief systems. Very often, these are presented as the only two serious options, for example, Alvin Plantinga (2000) assumes that the main competitor to Christian theism is naturalism. As a result, non-Christian religious traditions such as Daoism, Hinduism, Shinto, Buddhism, or even Judaism or Islam get short shrift.

This focus on Western traditions is not exceptional for philosophy of religion. It reflects a broader trend of a serious underrepresentation, and often a total absence, of non-Western traditions in Western philosophy departments. While there are good specialist journals for non-Western philosophy (for example, Journal of Indian Philosophy, Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy and Philosophy East and West, it is still almost absent in the most prestigious journals, such as Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Philosophical Review, Mind, and Noûs (Olberding 2016). Bryan Van Norden (2017) argues that an exclusive focus on Western traditions in philosophy is a relatively recent and historically contingent phenomenon. The idea that philosophy has Greek origins was not mainstream in the eighteenth century, although today many philosophy courses, programmes, and handbooks present it as such. The more common idea in the early modern period was that the origin of philosophy was Asian, either Indian or perhaps Chinese. When Jesuits first translated Confucian philosophy, it was immediately recognized as philosophy. So the focus on Western traditions is a relatively recent and culturally contingent phenomenon.

Next to this, philosophy of religion shows poor gender diversity, in line with academic philosophy in general, with estimates of women and non-binary people in the philosophy of religion as low as 10 per cent (Van Dyke 2015) to about 17 per cent (De Cruz 2018), which is below the estimated 25 per cent of women faculty in philosophy. Anecdotally, philosophy of religion also shows low ethnic diversity, although I am not aware of any systematic attempts to get a picture of the demographics.

Philosophers of religion are overwhelmingly theists, and most of these are Christian theists, with estimates ranging between 60.5 per cent (De Cruz 2017)
and 72.3 per cent (Bourget & Chalmers 2014). By contrast, in philosophical specializations outside of philosophy of religion the percentage of theists is low, with estimates ranging from 11.6 per cent (Bourget & Chalmers 2014) to 15 per cent (De Cruz 2017). Theists (mainly Christians) form a supermajority in philosophy of religion, but a minority outside of this subfield. This creates peculiar multilayered intersectional dynamics, where theists in philosophy of religion find themselves disparaged by their philosophical colleagues in other fields. This disparaging can take the form of dismissals of theism as a serious intellectual option, to even the open belittling of the good faith or intellectual rigor of theistic authors (e.g., Levine 2000). On the other hand, theists find themselves in the majority within their subdiscipline, and also, if working in countries such as the United States, find a more congenial environment in the broader cultural context (although this needs to be qualified, depending on the religious tradition one adheres to).

To give a sense of how these intersectional dynamics might play out, here is an example of an empirical study I did on professional philosophers' ideas about epistemic peer disagreement. I asked academic philosophers (N = 518) whether they considered philosophers they disagreed with on religious matters to be epistemic peers (De Cruz 2017). Unsurprisingly, philosophers of religion found themselves frequently dissenting with epistemic peers on religious matters, more so than other philosophers. But when I asked philosophers if there is a difference in how well informed both parties are, who is in a better position (they or the other philosopher), atheists were more likely to respond than theists that they were in an epistemically better situation (in particular, 81.9 per cent of atheists thought they were in a better epistemic position, compared to 59.8 per cent of theists—this difference is statistically significant, at the p < 0.001 level).

2.3 Beyond Epistemic Bubbles and Echo Chambers

C. Thi Nguyen (in press) draws a distinction between two kinds of epistemic social phenomena: epistemic bubbles and echo chambers. Both bubbles and echo chambers lack intellectual diversity. Epistemic bubbles lack relevant voices because of accidental factors, such as self-selection. Echo chambers, on the other hand, actively discredit relevant voices. As a result of the exclusion of relevant voices, both epistemic bubbles and echo chambers lack what Goldberg (2010: 160) calls coverage-reliability. Because of coverage-reliability we can sometimes justifiably

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5 The exact formulation was 'When you read or hear the views of another philosopher on religious matters, if this philosopher holds a position that is incompatible with yours (e.g., if you are an atheist and the philosopher in question is a theist), how often do you consider them to be your epistemic peer?'
come to believe that not-\( p \) because we have never heard someone say that \( p \). The reasoning behind this is something like ‘If \( p \) were true, I would have heard about it by now.’ But in order to make such justifiable inferences, two conditions need to be met. First, the source has to be there: members of the hearer’s community who ‘are disposed to report about the relevant sort of matters’. Second, the source must be reliable in finding out and broadcasting truths about the domain in question. Epistemic bubbles and echo chambers do not satisfy these conditions. But whereas epistemic bubbles can be easily popped by mere exposure to relevant information, echo chambers are more robust and actively insulate their members against relevant exposure. They accord a credibility excess to members, while discrediting any dissenters. While it is useful to draw this distinction between more accidental, innocent features of an epistemic landscape, and more deliberate features, Nguyen’s categorization neglects situations where the epistemic landscape is the result of both accidental features and more deliberate forms of exclusion.

This seems to be the case in philosophy of religion, the demographics and views of which do not reflect the global diversity of religious viewpoints. The preponderance of theists in philosophy of religion is a result of self-selection, but the exclusion of non-Western philosophical traditions is the result of a series of less innocent choices in Western academic philosophy that have led to the marginalization and dismissal of non-Western traditions as either inscrutable or non-philosophical. Given the complexity of the religious domain, it is doubtful that we would have coverage-reliability in the broad sense of covering every philosophically viable religious option. But we might get coverage-reliability in a narrower sense, namely in developing a wider range of philosophical views that better reflect humanity’s rich theological and religious traditions. By deliberately seeking out perspectives that are in tension with their own viewpoints, philosophers of religion can improve the epistemic landscape they find themselves in. Disagreement is not a temporary problem to be solved, but a welcome source of Kantian Widerstand (resistance or friction) by which we could anchor ourselves and sharpen our philosophical viewpoints (see also Dormandy, in press, who makes the broader claim that religious disagreement is an epistemic positive good for considerate, thoughtful religious believers).

3. Objections to Seeking out Epistemic Friction

This section will consider three potential objections to the call for epistemic friction in philosophy of religion. Even if we acknowledge that analytic philosophy of religion presents an incomplete picture of religious views and that it does not provide coverage-reliability, this does not automatically pose demands on philosophers of religion to seek other perspectives.
3.1 Epistemic Partiality

When we consider whether to adopt the testimony of others, we are moved by several competing demands and goals. Sometimes these goals can be in tension. As James (1896) already showed, there can be a tension between aiming for true beliefs and avoiding false ones. But our beliefs are also driven by considerations such as friendship, affiliation, or belonging. Perhaps these considerations are so important, at least in the case of religion, that they outweigh other demands. Being part of a religious community often means, implicitly or explicitly, to be epistemically partial to its intellectual tradition, which often extends far back in time.

According to Sarah Stroud (2006), friendship poses the doxastic demand to overestimate one’s friends. If friendship requires epistemic partiality, then perhaps religious or ideological affiliation does the same. For example, being epistemically partial to the Catholic tradition is what it means to be a good Catholic. Epistemic partiality to friends relates to a broad range of cases; for the purposes of this paper, I will take epistemic religious partiality to be narrower in scope: to be epistemically partial to a religious tradition is to exhibit partiality to it on issues of faith. Samuel Lebens (2020) has recently defended a claim along these lines: religious belief entails epistemic partiality to a given tradition. The example he gives is Judaism. To be Jewish is to be part of a tribe one is either born in, or chooses to become part of through conversion. This means being epistemically partial to claims within Judaism, as well as engaging in earnest in the practices (mitzvot) that are constitutive of Judaism. He argues it is permissible for Jews to not seriously entertain some ideas as live options, for example, that Jesus is the Messiah. Lebens particularly thinks it is permissible for Jews to not consider Jesus as the Messiah given the sacrifice that Jews were willing to make throughout history to defend Jewish identity in the face of forced conversion and other forms of oppression. If a Jew were to convert to Christianity, this would surely alienate her from family and friends.

To further specify, religious epistemic partiality is the constitutive claim that in order to be a serious adherent of a given religious tradition, particularly a tradition that is predominantly exclusivist, having epistemic partiality is (in part) constitutive of being a faithful adherent to that tradition. A further normative claim (in line with the epistemic partiality literature on friendship) would be that one ought therefore to show religious epistemic partiality. A number of authors have argued against the constitutive claim, i.e., in the case of friendship, being a good friend does not entail being epistemically partial to that friend (Arpaly & Brinkerhoff 2018). In many cases, it is better for the friend to have an accurate assessment of them rather than an unrealistically positive epistemic evaluation. The same could apply to religious beliefs. Take Isabella, a devout Roman Catholic concerned about women’s equality and justice. Isabella reads an article claiming that the fact that
Jesus had only male apostles is sufficient grounds for denying women to be ordained as Catholic priests. Religious epistemic partiality would mean that Isabella, if she is a good Catholic, should accord more weight to arguments that support the Catholic tradition than to arguments in support of women’s ordination (as this is not in line with the Catholic tradition). But in doing so, Isabella might be sacrificing other goods, such as her concern for gender equality in a church she cares about. I am not denying that epistemic partiality might play a role in religious traditions, especially those with an exclusivist bent, rather, it is unclear that epistemic partiality would require an over-evaluation of the religious tradition, or would be enough reason to resist the call for epistemic friction.

Moreover, epistemic partiality is not in line with the role of philosophical reflection in religious traditions. As Bill Wood (2014) has argued, doing analytic philosophy is ‘to present the truth as the author sees it. This single-minded focus on truth, when combined with the specific techniques of analytic philosophical argument, allows analytic theology to become a spiritual practice.’ It is a spiritual practice, because it is truth-oriented. Just like mystic practitioners as the Sufi al-Ghazâlî or the Roman Catholic nun Teresa of Ávila sought to come closer to God through cultivating religious practices, the analytic philosopher of religion attempts to come closer to God through a relentless seeking of the truth. Wood sees precursors of this mindset in Anselm and Aquinas. He emphasizes the ability to identify imaginatively with one’s intellectual opponents, something that can be seen in, for example, Aquinas’ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, as a key element of doing analytic theology (and, by extension, analytic philosophy of religion). In the light of this, epistemic partiality does not seem like a desirable stance for philosophers of religion.

### 3.2 Imaginative Resistance

It may be difficult for philosophers of religion to entertain some religious positions as live possibilities. The hesitance of a Jew to imagine Jesus as the Messiah might be a case of what Tamar Gendler (2000) termed *imaginative resistance*. Imaginative resistance is the phenomenon where we encounter a potential scenario—in Gendler’s seminal discussion, a fictional scenario—that evokes a certain resistance in us that prevents us from imagining it fully. For example, we might find it unproblematic to imagine a flat Earth, but we might find it difficult to imagine a world where it is morally praiseworthy to murder one’s siblings. We seem to be either unwilling or unable to countenance such scenarios.⁶

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⁶ Empirical support shows people find morally deviant scenarios more difficult to imagine, for example, that an Aztec human sacrifice would be the right thing to do (Liao, Strohminger, &
Just as it is hard for Jews to imagine Jesus as the Messiah, even in the context of philosophy, it might be hard for a Christian to imagine that Christ would be mad or bad, rather than God, grasping the two other horns of C.S. Lewis’s trilemma. If it turns out that imaginative resistance plays a major role in how our religious beliefs are shaped and maintained, this would go some way to absolve philosophers of religion from personally engaging in alternative religious practices or entertaining religious beliefs. Some philosophers have gone to great lengths to engage in such practices. For example, John Hick worked in a Christian and post-Christian context, but when he moved to multicultural Birmingham (a city in the British Midlands with large ethnic minority populations) he worked together with leaders of Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, and Jewish communities, and attended their local places of worship. Immersing himself in these different ritual contexts, Hick moved away from Christian exclusivism and formulated a pluralist position (Badham 2014). But next to this rather exacting way of seeking epistemic friction, we can make our epistemic environment more congenial, by taking active steps that make our environment more epistemically diverse. To read authors who defend religious positions quite different from our own does not mean we have to fully countenance these, or consider them as live options. At the very least, we could reason as follows, ‘these alternative systems look false to me, but lots of intelligent, well-informed, thoughtful people endorse them. It would be intellectually irresponsible of me to dismiss them without understanding the reasons these people have to support these views.’

Intellectual engagement with such alternative systems would be possible even if engagement with them at other levels (e.g., emotional) remained difficult. One might still worry that the call for epistemic friction would be too onerous. It clearly would be too intellectually demanding, even for a philosopher of religion with ample research time (let alone one who works at a teaching-focused, under-resourced school) to acquaint herself with all religious traditions to a sufficient extent that she gains a basic understanding of them. But it does mean that it is commendable for philosophers of religion to at least gain some understanding of one or more traditions outside of Christianity and naturalistic atheism.

### 3.3 Facilitating Oppressive Views

One final worry about the call for epistemic friction is that it would put an unreasonable burden on people who are already oppressed to further engage with and take seriously views that have the potential to further oppress them. How much intellectual space does, say, a gay philosopher of religion need to give...
to philosophical positions that say that being gay is a disability\(^7\) that ought to be socially discouraged, and, if possible, cured?

While I cannot offer full treatment of this problem (which is not unique for philosophy of religion, see e.g., the ‘Nazi problem’ against Longino’s concept of scientific objectivity, Hicks 2011), I will offer a few comments on it. First, philosophers of religion from socially disadvantaged positions have likely already encountered views that are degrading or demeaning to them. Such views are likely widespread in religious communities (e.g., anti-LGBTQ stances). As Elisabeth Barnes (2018) argues, while some arguments can cause harm (she offers the example of Peter Singer’s arguments about disability), such arguments will continue to be made in the public sphere. ‘The idea that disabled people are lesser or defective is part of everyday reality for disabled people and caregivers.’ For this reason, Barnes (2018) recommends engaging with and pushing back against these offensive philosophical arguments.

Second, the demand for epistemic friction does not require that one engage in detail, and exhaustively, with each and every position. It only requires that one widen one’s scope beyond one’s own religious and philosophical position and tradition. There are a great many possible and actual philosophical positions, and it is not practically possible for any one philosopher to engage with them exhaustively. Rather, what the call for epistemic friction demands is that one widens one’s scope of philosophical investigation and engagement beyond that of like-minded people.

### 4. Conclusion: Intellectual Diversity and Epistemic Friction

The call for increased intellectual diversity and for epistemic friction in philosophy of religion cannot be divorced from the broader context in which authors in this subdiscipline write. As citizens of heterogeneous societies, we have minimal epistemic duties to be informed about the religious traditions of others. To investigate what these duties amount to, Medina (2013) looks at an incident in 2005 when a student placed a pig’s head at Vanderbilt’s Schulman Center for Jewish Life, which also happened to be next to a vegetarian café. The student claimed that he did not know pig’s heads were an anti-Semitic symbol and instead argued that he merely pulled an anti-vegetarian prank while drunk. According to Medina, the student’s alleged ignorance is not justified, as the student, being a member of American society, has a responsibility to inform himself about different religious traditions and their interrelations. It was religious privilege that allowed the student to get away with being ignorant. Moreover, if he didn’t

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\(^7\) See for example, Swinburne (2007: 303–6, fn. F, 361).
know about Judaism—as he claimed—why was he not taught about this religion as an undergraduate?

Philosophers are part of this broader intellectual community, and by educating students, we also bear what Medina calls network responsibility. Network responsibility does not put responsibility entirely on individuals or on groups, but rather looks at one’s doxastic and ethical responsibilities within a broader network. Philosophers play a role as educators, public speakers, and writers, and thus play a role in the broader context in which students are educated about other religious traditions. It’s also notable that philosophers of religion themselves have a desire to engage more with living religious traditions and to increase diversity. For example, in my open question survey (De Cruz 2018) I did not ask participants explicitly to evaluate philosophy of religion as a discipline, but nevertheless several of them spontaneously commented on what they perceived as its insularity in answer to the optional final question (‘Are there any additional anecdotes or personal observations that you think are relevant for this study?’). As one assistant professor working in China wrote,

> Philosophy of religion is a field well-suited to contribute helpful resources for clarifying confusion as well as disagreement at areas of cross-cultural contact, but the field may be hindered in this effort so long as it employs models of religiosity that have been derived from philosophical debates within Western Christianity.

Epistemic friction can be obtained in diachronic and synchronic form, both by looking at past traditions and at the views of current interlocutors. Hence, one form of low-hanging fruit is to look within the traditions that philosophers of religion have engaged with already, and reappraise how those traditions can reinvigorate our philosophical reflection. Much philosophical reflection, in the West but also elsewhere, took place within the context of religion. Philosophy of religion tends to dip into this rich history rather selectively. For example, Sarah Coakley (2009) notes that philosophers such as Alston and Swinburne have turned to female contemplative mystics such as Teresa of Ávila to support their claim that religious experience can be a source of knowledge. But they tend to present a sanitized version of those mystics, filtering out their ‘apophasic caveats and their bodily responses’, which Coakley (2009: 285) suspects are ‘elements of their witness that will not quite fit the laudable epistemic purposes that these philosophers intend’.

History of philosophy can thus be a source of epistemic friction. Historical sources should not merely be mined selectively for punchy quotes, or as a form of historical sock puppeteering that lends authority to contemporary philosophical ideas. Rather, a detailed engagement with historical sources can be corrective and complementary. Christina Van Dyke (2018) cites the phenomenological character of mystical experiences as female and embodied, for example, the vivid sensory
imagery that the medieval mystic Hadewijch of Brabant used to describe her union with Christ. Such work challenges the narrow focus on mystic experience as a source of knowledge of God in analytic philosophy of religion, but doing this non-sanitized, non-selective history of philosophy of religion well requires an honest engagement with historical sources.

History of philosophy also helps against boundary policing, sometimes seen in philosophy, where the question ‘Is this paper philosophy?’ is a conversation-ender. Indeed, if we look at the history of philosophy, we can see how the range of philosophical argumentation was broader than it tends to be in contemporary philosophical practice. This includes genres such as fiction, poetry, and philosophical dialogues. Take, for example, Ibn Tufayl’s *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* ([twelfth century] 2003), about Hayy who grows up alone on an island, removed from all human society, and is brought up by a female gazelle. Growing up, Hayy learns not only relevant facts about biology, anatomy, astronomy, and botany, through experience and reason, he also discovers philosophical truths about the existence of God through the formulation of natural theological arguments. This short story is not supposed to be realistic, but the story nevertheless shows something about the value of natural theology, and supports Ibn Tufayl’s idea that revelation is not necessary for proper religious belief.

Getting out of our comfort zone will also mean more engagement with philosophy of religion beyond the dichotomy between naturalistic atheism and Christianity. Given many good translations, it is no longer required to understand, say, classic Chinese, Arabic, or Sanskrit in order to read primary sources. Good translations can be incorporated into philosophy of religion undergraduate and graduate courses. Organizations such as the American Philosophical Association provide useful resources to do this. By engaging with religious traditions outside of Christianity, we can expect a broadening of the scope of philosophy of religion. To give some recent examples, engagement with the work of the Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi has given rise to new ideas in the philosophy of religion about fictionalism (Chung 2018) and about cosmic emulation as a way for people to acquire moral virtues (Kidd, 2020).

To obtain thorough epistemic friction, a detailed and sincere engagement with dead philosophers will not be sufficient. Living philosophers from diverse traditions and demographics can provide even more friction and can enrich the philosophical community. As philosophers we shape the field and prioritize certain phenomena in our experience as worthy of philosophical attention, and even what kinds of engagements count as philosophical. It is important that philosophical communities become more diverse, so as to reflect the wider diversity of religious beliefs and approaches to religion in the world. Making philosophical communities more diverse is a long-term project. Efforts might include editing volumes specifically focused on marginalized voices and traditions in philosophy of religion, prize competitions for works that seek to diversify
philosophy of religion, or even just subtle cultural changes within graduate studies departments to provide a more welcoming climate.

In conclusion, I have argued that philosophers of religion should seek more epistemic friction. As a result of innocent and less innocent factors, philosophy of religion presents a hostile epistemic landscape that can hamper knowledge acquisition. Epistemic friction can be accomplished by both individual and collective efforts. By providing a rich range of intellectual options and considerations, philosophy of religion can become more connected to wider intellectual communities and can achieve coverage-reliability in the narrow sense of looking at religious options that are options for engaged thinkers across the world.

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