Some Clarifications and a Modest View on Social Epistemology and Religion: A Reply to Robertson

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I'd like to thank David Robertson (2022) for his response to my work (2022). It gave me quite a bit to consider, especially given that I tend to think of myself as an epistemologist in a broadly analytic tradition, rather than a particularly social epistemologist or scholar of religion. Rather than attempting to respond to everything, I'd like to take this as an opportunity to sharpen and clarify certain things about my aims and views, and to say something about how I think social epistemology should attend to religion.

Regarding QAnon

First, Robertson notes that I "like many scholars, apparently [accept] that QAnon is irrational, and dangerous as a result. Yet equally 'irrational' accounts which are accepted by a large proportion of people, such as the creation myth of Christianity, are not spoken of in such terms" (50). I take it that Robertson's view is that I hold that QAnon is by definition or by nature irrational. This isn't my view, for two reasons. First, the epistemological framework with respect to which I consider both QAnon and religion is quasi-fideism, a kind of hinge epistemology of religion. The rough idea of hinge epistemology is that all epistemic activity takes place within a framework of optimal certainties that one holds, called hinges. Hinges themselves are arational commitments, but they are constitutive of a rational framework (Coliva 2015, 129; see also Pritchard 2016, 90-91). The rationality of beliefs one has is a matter of their fit within the hinge framework one in fact has.[1]

I can't think that QAnon is by definition irrational and therefore dangerous because I can't think it is by definition irrational. I think that hinge commitment is a kind of arational commitment so adherents of QAnon (QAdherents) who have the appropriate QAnon related hinge do so arationally, so that can't be the irrational part. QAnon related beliefs which follow from or are appropriately grounded in this hinge and the other hinges of the QAdherent are rational in virtue of that relationship with optimally held certainties, so that can't be the irrational part either. It could be that a QAdherent has a lot of QAnon-related beliefs which in fact don't bear the right relationships to their hinges. Maybe they lack a special QHinge and their beliefs don't get the appropriate foundation in their other hinges. That kind of QAdherent *would* be irrational, but not because of anything special about QAnon. It'd be a matter of how their beliefs relate to their hinges.

The second reason this can't be my view is that I don't want to draw any kind of inference from irrationality and danger. As discussed above, QAdherence might sometimes be irrational. It's also certainly possible that QAdherence might cause one to be a danger to themselves or others. And, surely, there are times when those overlap. But I don't think that QAnon's irrationality causes it to be dangerous, or anything like that. If it is dangerous, it is because particular QAdherents are prompted by their QAnon related beliefs (the rationality

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[1] There are an enormous number of formulations of hinge epistemology. I primarily follow Duncan Pritchard's here given that his work on quasi-fideism is central to current discussions of the topic. The primary text for Pritchard's hinge epistemology *Epistemic Angst* (2016), and there are numerous pieces laying out his account of quasi-fideism, including his (2011) and (2018).

of which is a matter of their relationship to arational hinges) to do things which are dangerous.[2]

It is true that in my discussion of how to interact with QAdherents, I focus primarily on how you should interact if you want to "convert" them, and this might suggest that it is my view that, in general, QAdherents in general ought to be brought around to other worldviews (perhaps because QAnon and its adherents are dangerous). I do think the practical implications of understanding QAnon in quasi-fideist terms are worth considering, given that what I aimed to explore was not just whether QAnon *could* be understood in such terms, but how understanding it in such terms (rather than as just something to be debunked) might change how one interacts with QAdherents. One such interaction one might have with a QAdherent is an attempt to convert them, and there is certainly a portion of the population that does think that this response to QAnon, or something very much like this response, is the proper one.

Ultimately, though, any discussion of whether and how to convert QAdherents should be understood conditionally. I argued that there are certain things about the epistemic lives of QAdherents which are illuminated when QAnon is understood through a quasi-fideist epistemology, and that some of these things are important if one wants to understand how to "convert" a QAdherent. *If* you want to convert them. I don't think anything in the nature of QAnon or quasi-fideism directly entails that attempted conversion is the appropriate response. My personal view is that if there's a reason for converting QAdherents, it's more likely something practical than epistemic. Something other than the mere fact that one is a QAdherent is what would drive one to convert them.

The existence of communities like Reddit's r/QAnonCasualties and journalistic pieces of various sorts, ranging from exposees to advice columns, suggests that plenty of people who interact with QAdherents have various practical problems communicating with and understanding QAdherents (describing one's QAdherent family members as "lost" or in some way unrecognizable is a common refrain in these pieces), or are concerned that they are unsafe or a bad influence in some way (advice columns, for example, occasionally feature parents writing in to ask whether and how their children should be allowed to interact with QAdherent grandparents (e.g. Herman 2021). Ultimately, while I don't think that the default interaction with QAdherents ought to be conversion and I don't argue for that, I suspect (and this is just a hunch), that plenty of people who are interested for whatever reason in "what to do about QAnon" are really interested in getting people to stop being committed to QAnon, and the quasi-fideist account does bear on that, so I've explored that.

Religion and Conspiracy Theories

Robertson also notes that my view might not be as novel or controversial as it seems, and it's definitely true that I'm certainly not the first to connect religion and conspiracy theories,

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[2] More generally, I just don't think there's a clear inference from irrationality to danger. Plenty of irrational beliefs might be harmless and plenty of rational beliefs harmful, whether to the self or others.

or QAnon and religion. I'm really interested in just two particular things at the intersection of QAnon, conspiracy theories, and religion: 1) whether the epistemic structure of QAnon (and perhaps other global conspiracy theories)[3] is sufficiently religion-like to be amenable to explanation via quasi-fideism and, more importantly, 2) whether that parallel can be leveraged to show something about how we should be thinking about our interactions with adherents of global conspiracy theories.

I see my argument going roughly like this:

> 1. Plenty of people, both philosophers and laypeople, do think that conspiracy theories are in some way epistemically problematic. There are a lot of ways this might be expressed. Maybe conspiracy theorists are irrational or epistemically vicious, or conspiracy theories themselves are in some way bad theories (e.g. they're all marked by some kind of internal inconsistency, they're unfalsifiable, they don't fit the available evidence in the right way, etc). Perhaps this sort of view is *most* common among laypeople, but it isn't hard to find epistemologists that think this way. Certainly in ordinary use, calling someone a conspiracy theorist or calling a theory a conspiracy theory is to offer some kind of criticism. We definitely don't endorse theories or theorists by appending the word "conspiracy".

> 2. Religious beliefs and commitments, as Robertson notes, *are* often something of a pass in everyday life, in the sense that they're treated as being immune from certain kinds of criticism, or we give them some degree of special consideration or weight. We don't immediately treat them as "to be debunked" or as junk beliefs even if we ourselves are not inclined to join in the believing. We can understand how religious commitments have a special, often unshakeable, place in the epistemic lives of religious people. I think this kind of position is best understood as an acknowledgement of religious hinges forming part of the rational framework the religious believer uses. They engage with the world from a different starting point than people lacking religious hinges.

> 3. Quasi-fideism offers a kind of parity argument. It defends the rationality of religious belief by showing how *all* beliefs rely on hinges. The fact that religious beliefs ultimately depend on ungrounded grounds is no indictment of their rationality, because all beliefs ultimately depend on ungrounded grounds.

> 4. This parity argument is usually used in the defense of the rationality of religious belief, but it can run the other way too, perhaps opening us to the possibility of showing beliefs that are not intuitively religious the same kind of special treatment religious beliefs sometimes get. If certain kinds of beliefs

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[3] I'm only interested in global conspiracy theories. I make no claims about local conspiracy theories.

> can be shown to be sufficiently like religious beliefs, especially with respect to the structure of their rationality, we should consider whether they too might be deserving of the same kind of understanding and deference that religious beliefs are given, rather than just criticism (i.e. whether or not we endorse them, we can see how central these commitments are to the epistemic lives of those committed to them).

So, it's not that I think religious beliefs are special or exempt from rational criticism. I'm a quasi-fideist, not a fideist. They're open to the same kinds of criticism as the rest of our beliefs are, namely criticism done with respect to the relevant hinges. But I do think that a lot of people start from the position that religious beliefs get a pass of some sort, and quasi-fideism's parity argument can give us a route in to thinking about ostensibly non-religious beliefs which might work the same way as more intuitively religious beliefs, and thus may deserve at least some of the same deference we generally seem to extend to religious beliefs.

Robertson also notes a perceived Christian-normativity or centrism in my work:

> Smith clearly understands these issues better than the examples listed above. Nevertheless, Christian-normativity is present in his paper. Smith notes—correctly—that there are multiple definitions of religion, "each with its own difficulties", and that appealing to one or other "would likely not produce a compelling case" (361). Problematically, though, he then immediately offers his own definition which he considers merely "paradigmatic" and "uncontroversial" (361). It is, in fact, simply Protestant Christianity, and his definition simply doesn't fit most of the so-called "World Religions" (Cotter and Robertson 2016). Yet the simple fact that it appears so natural, so "uncontroversial", to see it as uncontroversial is rather telling (52).

I'm only interested in a definition of religion to the extent that one is necessary for showing the appropriate parallels between QAnon and religion, and I don't mean to offer a definition of "religion" for general use. At the same time, I don't intend that my paper be explicitly "Christian-normative" or anything like that. Like Robertson, I'm inclined to think that religion is more likely a socially constructed category (and sometimes a very unclear one) than any sort of natural kind. I think J.Z. Smith is broadly correct when he writes that it is not that religion cannot be defined, but that it can be defined, with greater or lesser success, more than fifty ways … "Religion" is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as "language" plays in linguistics or "culture" plays in anthropology. There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon (Smith 281-282).

All of this, of course, means that if I'm trying to show that QAnon is a religion I can't get away with appealing to any of a number of definitions of religion.[4] As Robertson agrees, that wouldn't make a compelling case. Instead, the best way to show that QAnon is a religion is to show that it has a number of features which would be widely accepted as religious. I identified several parallels, the most obvious being: having a prophet, the prophet's revealing some truth, a messiah, a struggle of good against evil, and a holy text.

Robertson contends that it's problematic for me to treat these parallels as paradigmatic or uncontroversial. I've simply shown that QAnon has parallels with Protestant Christianity, which might be unsurprising given that a large chunk of the United States identifies as some kind of Christian. It's unclear to me why this is problematic, at least for my argument. First, quite simply, Protestant Christianity, in its many varieties, is certainly a religion, its status as such is about as uncontested as anything in regards to religion can be, and thus it is an excellent example of the kind of thing which counts as a religion. In that case, the parallels I've drawn work just fine, at least as far as I need them to for my argument.

Second, it might be that Christianity is an anomaly as far as religions go, it's deeply unlike all sorts of other things that are also counted as religions.[5] If this is the case, then even if the parallels I've identified are paradigmatically and uncontroversially Christian, they're not paradigmatically and uncontroversially religious. However, this doesn't seem to be true either. As best I can tell, plenty of what we'd normally identify as religions have these

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[4] Or is sufficiently like one as makes no difference, or shares many features with religion, or something like that. I prefer the strongest version; I think QAnon is a religion. However, reviewers at one point suggested that a weaker version might be preferable. This should suggest that there are certainly people who find the claim strange enough that the time spent carefully drawing out the relevant parallels is worth it. Again, this is just a hunch, but I strongly suspect that despite journalistic and academic work to the contrary, for plenty of people, QAnon does *not* intuitively count as a "religion", that's just the wrong use of the concept. Were I to tell a self-professed areligious QAdherent that I thought they were in fact religious on the grounds of their commitment to QAnon, I suspect they'd push back or at least assert that I'm "just wrong". It's just not how the concept gets used on a day-to-day basis. Further, most of the informal conversations concerning this paper that I had with both academics and laypeople suggest that this hunch is not meritless. So, it is the fact that I just don't think most people are inclined to seeing QAnon as a religion which motivated the inclusion of multiple pages explaining how I saw these parallels. It is also not the case that I think "no true religion would peddle fantastical political conspiracy theories, so QAnon cannot be a true religion" (Robertson 50). I have no problem with connecting religion to unsavory things for, as Robertson rightly notes, "reluctance to connect religion with anything negative is understandable in a journalistic context, but is hardly a scholarly virtue" (Robertson 50). (See, for example, my inclusion of Smith's argument that the Jonestown mass-suicide ought ot be a topic for religious studies as a field.) However, plenty of people are inclined to make a distinction between religion and cult on something like that basis, and it is definitely a virtue to be able to provide counters to likely objections or answers to likely questions, especially if the position I take goes against that which I take to be the most ordinary or everyday one. As I noted, I had reason to think these sorts of issues were ones plenty of people might have. Ultimately, being sure of this hunch would require far more empirical research than I can do for this reply, but it would be interesting to see whether "the man on the street" is inclined to see QAnon as a religion at this point in QAnon's development.

[5] If the issue is something broader, perhaps that the concept of religion I'm using in the first place is Christian-centric even though it can accommodate non-Christian religions, then all I can say is that I have to start somewhere, I'm not interested in developing a definition of religion from the ground up, and the concept of religion I'm using fits the purposes of my investigation, so I'm not sure why this starting point is worse than any other.

features. The other Abrahamic faiths (including non-Protestant Christianity and offshoots like Samaritanism), Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and the Bahá'í Faith come to mind.[6] Further, even if it were true that various Protestant Christianities were the only religions possessing the exact list of features I identified as uncontroversially religious, it would be easy to find numerous examples of religions possessing some subset of that list, thus making any of those parallels suitably paradigmatic or uncontroversial. In short, while the state of religious life in the United States makes it the case the most obvious parallels between QAnon and religion are between QAnon and Protestant Christianity, it's hardly the case that my argument in any way suffers on the grounds that my account of the parallels between QAnon and religion amount to an account of the connection between QAnon and Protestant Christianity.[7]

Closing Thoughts

I can't speak in any great detail to Robertson's points about the state of religious studies as a field or its interaction with social epistemology, so I'll limit myself to a couple of closing thoughts on the matter. Robertson writes "social epistemologists have generally regarded religion as a matter of belief exclusively…" I'm not sure whether this is true but if it is, it shouldn't be surprising: social epistemology is a kind of epistemology. Belief (knowledge, understanding, inquiry, etc) are really what we're interested in as epistemologists. Social epistemologists should absolutely acknowledge that we won't have complete accounts of religion if we think of it as only a matter of belief but if that's not our central concern,[8] in one form or another, at least qua epistemologists, then it's not really clear what we're on about. We don't need to think that social epistemology, as a kind of epistemology, has the whole story about religion in order to say that social epistemology has something interesting to say about the epistemic features of religion.

Social epistemology as a field can't ignore the fact that religion consists of more than belief (and many other doxastic states) but it seems perfectly fine for social epistemology to focus on the epistemic facets of religion. Being an epistemologist, I'm primarily interested in working with a concept of religion that allows me to focus on its doxastic features. A sociologist might need a different concept, a theologian or clergyman yet another, and a metaphysician still another. Of course, all of us should expect that our concepts will have some overlap, and inasmuch as we aim to have a dialogue across disciplines or make any claim to talking about the same subject as our colleagues in different fields, we'll need to have reasonably convergent definitions and something in the way of explanations for why we differ where we do.

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[6] There are, of course, an enormous number of details getting glossed over here. The Bahá'í Faith, for example, has a very different ontology of evil than the Abrahamic faiths, treating it as the absence of good.

[7] See my (Smith 2021) for a fuller account of my thoughts on the relationship between the category of "religion" and what that ultimately requires of a hinge epistemology.

[8] In this vein of philosophy of religion, I very much like the work of James Smith (2021) and Howard Wettstein (2012).

Given the above, I'm loath to conclude much more than I already have regarding a general approach social epistemologists should take to religion. I can, however, say something about why my approach is the way it is. My aim was to make my argument in a way that's broadly accessible, intelligible, and hopefully persuasive, even to those outside of social epistemology (or philosophy) and religious studies. So, I made a point of working with concepts and from starting points that I took to be broadly intuitive, whether or not they reflected the most nuanced or up-to-date positions in philosophy or religious studies. I just don't think that most people think or argue in the most nuanced terms on a day-to-day basis.

I should likewise be able to explain to at least some degree how what I have to say in fact does align with how I take people to generally use those concepts (even if what I have to say is disguised in the technical jargon of philosophy), and be able to explain why I deviate from them in some principled way, for some good reason. So, for example, I find it to be worth taking the time to walk through the extra qualifications and responses to potential objections to my account of QAnon as a religion because I think that's a view that involves going against some widely held intuitions about what counts as a religion. Maybe these qualifications are unnecessary for those who are already conversant Other philosophers or religious studies scholars may have different aims in their work and so approach their arguments differently. That's completely fine; it's not my place to say that the field in general should argue in a certain way.

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