



The Rationality of Belonging: Cognitive Crises and Epistemic Clash within a Science and Religion Belief System

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Doxastic conflicts are a pervasive feature of the modern human experience. We form beliefs on various interrelated subjects that, not rarely, conflict with each other. In this article, I argue that when an individual experiences a crisis between doxastic attitudes toward science and religion, there may be a deeper issue than just a disharmony among beliefs. There may be a higher-order clash between two distinct norms of rationality, which provides a robust account for why doxastic conflicts of this nature are widespread and challenging to resolve. I employ concepts from social epistemology to elucidate the nature of the epistemic clash and explore possible resolutions. First, I characterize a hypothetical conflict between an agent's scientific and religious beliefs. Second, I introduce three categories from contemporary debates in social epistemology: epistemic dependence, expertise, and epistemic community. Third, employing these categories, I characterize the high-order conflict an agent may experience between two distinct norms of rationality. Fourth, I describe four asymmetries between scientific and religious doxastic attitudes that bear importance to rationality. Fifth, from these asymmetries, I suggest a course of action an agent may take to mitigate their cognitive uneasiness and move towards a more integrated rational profile.



Introduction

It is a widely held belief that science and religion are in conflict, a view reflected in various surveys.¹ However, academic scholarship paints a more nuanced picture. Rather than being intrinsically antagonistic, the relationship between science and religion is shaped by a complex interplay of personal, institutional, and cultural factors (Brooke 1991; Brooke and Numbers 2011). Scholars have also highlighted that the concepts of “science” and “religion” are culturally conditioned and historically contingent (Harrison 2015, 2022). In Western contexts, particularly those involving Christian movements, recent work has argued that the perceived conflict between science and religion is less about fundamental epistemic differences and more about moral allegiances, ideological commitments, and institutional interests (Evans 2018).

While this research has enriched our understanding, it also raises questions about the relevance of traditional approaches to this relationship. Some suggest that focusing on cognitive and epistemic dimensions may be either overly narrow or limited in explanatory power (Harrison 2023). While I view historical and epistemic perspectives as complementary, in this article, I employ tools from social epistemology to defend the continued relevance of epistemic and doxastic analysis.

Doxastic conflicts are a pervasive feature of the modern human experience. We form beliefs on various interrelated subjects that often conflict with each other. This is particularly evident in many people’s scientific and religious beliefs. In this article, I argue that when an individual experiences a crisis between doxastic attitudes toward science and religion, there may be a deeper issue than just a disharmony among beliefs. There may be a higher-order clash between two distinct norms of rationality, which provides a robust account for why doxastic conflicts of this nature are widespread and challenging to resolve. Here, I employ some concepts from social epistemology to elucidate the nature of the epistemic clash and explore possible resolutions.

It is important from the outset to clarify that my focus is not on religious beliefs in general but specifically on those that intersect with the science-and-religion debate, where epistemic tensions arise due to conflicting claims about the natural world.

I proceed as follows. First, I characterize a hypothetical doxastic conflict between the scientific and religious beliefs of an epistemic agent. Second, I introduce three key categories from contemporary debates in social epistemology: epistemic dependence, expertise, and epistemic community. These categories are crucial for my argument. Third, employing these categories, I characterize the deeper, or high-order, conflict an epistemic agent may experience—that is, a conflict between two distinct norms of rationality. Fourth, I point out that there are four important asymmetries between scientific and religious doxastic

attitudes that bear importance to our rationality. Fifth and finally, from these asymmetries, I tentatively suggest a course of action a hypothetical epistemic agent may take to mitigate their cognitive uneasiness and move towards a more integrated rational profile.

Locating the Doxastic Conflict

Think of the following sets of propositions, set s and set r .

Propositions of set s :

- The Earth is approximately 4.5 billion years old.
- Modern *Homo sapiens* emerged from an initial bottleneck of approximately 10,000 individuals.
- Traits such as predation and violence were part of animal behavior long before *Homo sapiens* emerged.

Propositions of set r :

- The universe was created by God in seven days.
- God created the original couple from whom all other humans descend.
- Traits such as predation and violence emerged among humans only after the original sin.

Consider that propositions in set s are scientific propositions, while propositions in set r are religious propositions, and both sets have entailments for the science and religion debate. Let us imagine an epistemic agent, Abelia, who is a devout Christian and well educated. Abelia, despite her solid education, is neither a scientist nor a theologian.²

Now, let us suppose Abelia has acquired various beliefs about the theory of evolution and the doctrine of creation. It is likely that, not being an expert, she has acquired them through testimony—someone told her such things, and she believed them. She has not independently collected evidence, assessed it, and made a judgment to decide what to believe. Instead, she believes these propositions because someone she trusts has communicated them to her, whether through conversations, courses, lectures, or other means.

However, Abelia is facing a cognitive crisis. She has realized that some of the propositions of s are incompatible with the propositions of r .³ On one side, Abelia considers modern science a valuable and reliable intellectual endeavor; as a religious person, however, she does not want to give up beliefs she considers essential to her faith. As an agent who aims at rationality, what should she do?

From Individual to Social Epistemology

Traditionally, the image of the ideal epistemic agent was aligned with the notion of intellectual autonomy. According to this view, the rational person is the one who, facing a question or an inquiry, gathers the evidence, carefully evaluates it, and forms their own conclusion. Such an agent does not defer their judgment to others and does not believe something merely because others do. In fact, believing something just because others believe it can be seen as vicious thinking.

However, in recent decades, developments in social epistemology have raised staggering objections to this individualistic portrayal of rationality (e.g., Hardwig 1985; Code 2006).⁴ Fundamentally, social epistemologists argue that much of our knowledge is acquired through social routes and mechanisms, relying on and trusting what others communicate (Goldberg 2020; Greco 2020). Furthermore, our beliefs and pictures of the world are deeply influenced by our epistemic communities and other institutions that participate in the production and dissemination of information (Cabral 2025; Fricker 2010; Calvert-Minor 2011).

Among the various relevant themes, three are important for my purposes: epistemic dependence and deference, expertise and epistemic authority, and epistemic community. Let us examine each of these concepts.

Epistemic Dependence and Deference

If you are someone like me or Abelia, you have acquired many of your important beliefs on the basis of someone telling you about them. To defer a belief in a proposition p for a subject X is to believe p because X believes and asserts p . In this case, I epistemically depend on X because my belief in p is explained by X 's belief in p , and the quality of my belief in p depends on certain properties X has for believing p .⁵

You could say that the propositions from set s work in this way for Abelia, since she has not collected and personally assessed the evidence for her belief that *Homo sapiens* emerged from an initial bottleneck of approximately 10,000 individuals. She has not investigated the fossil record, conducted experiments, or evaluated the available information. Instead, she believes it because the vast majority of paleontologists believe and assert it; i.e., Abelia trusts that these experts possess good reasons for believing it.

In religious matters, something similar holds for Abelia. She is not a specialist in the original languages of the scriptures or the culture of Second Temple Judaism. Nonetheless, she believes Jesus was a real person who died, crucified by the Roman Empire. Probably, she has not had any contact with old documents, debates over textual evidence, or archeological findings. Instead, she came to believe because her religious minister or trusted person told her so.

As I explore shortly, it is significant that in both cases Abelia seems to follow a rational pattern of belief formation. As Heidi Grasswick (2019) claims, there is no inherent conflict between pursuing intellectual autonomy and recognizing

our need for various epistemic dependences. More than that, on many occasions, the best thing to do is to defer to those better positioned than ourselves to find out the correct answers to our questions.

Expertise and Epistemic Authority

On what occasions should we defer our opinion to the opinion of others? In the aforementioned examples, Abelia has not collected or evaluated evidence through a personal inquiry. But what if she wanted to do so? Well, likely, she would not be able to, given that collecting and assessing evidence in specialized fields require multiple years of training, a vast amount of background knowledge, and specific skills—none of which she possesses.

In circumstances like these, we seek to defer our opinions and inquiries not to random people but to experts, those “who are best positioned to determine answers to questions in their domain of expertise, and this is because the experts have the best information to go on, and they are best equipped to evaluate that information” (Matheson 2024, 15).

Beyond the somewhat trivial observation that we often defer our opinions to those of relevant experts, many argue that in various cases, the most rational course of action is to defer to experts (Goldman 2018; Miller 2015), as they are better positioned than us to answer questions and generate explanations within their fields of expertise. Considering the existence of experts in matters of science and on matters of religion, it seems rational for an epistemic agent to defer to the proper epistemic authorities. If Abelia learned the propositions of set s in school and the propositions of set r in her church, and considering that the propositions in s and r are endorsed, respectively, by the dominant scientific consensus and religious authorities within her community—who are themselves often presented as domain experts—Abelia is, from her standpoint, rational in believing such things. While she does not possess the direct reasons, she is in possession of social evidence⁶—reasons to believe in the proper epistemic authorities, acknowledging that they do possess firsthand evidence.

Epistemic Community

The third topic relevant to our concerns is the fact that we all are part of, often simultaneously, various epistemic communities.⁷ Epistemic communities, generally speaking, are groups of people who deal with information and knowledge. In these communities, a variety of epistemic practices are performed with the aim to produce and distribute information. It is common for members to divide the cognitive tasks and allocate some level of trust to one another. Such trust explains why our epistemic dependences are usually put on members of our communities. We hope that at least some members within our communities are experts who thus will be the epistemic authorities—those we trust to obtain sound information to form our beliefs and make all kinds of practical decisions.

From this broad characterization, epistemic communities encompass not only academic departments and scientific research teams but also a diversity of groups such as juries, families, and churches. In a family, for instance, many epistemic practices are performed, some kind of division of cognitive labor is commonplace, and epistemic dependence and trust are pervasive: we typically trust our family members when they assert something about themselves, and we rely on accorded norms to guide interactions (e.g., rules for informing each other when one basic item is missing). While churches are communities with spiritual and moral ends, it is reasonable to also characterize them as epistemic communities. Within churches and other religious groups, information circulates, and various epistemic practices are performed, including teaching doctrines, delivering sermons, providing counseling, and transmitting religious views. The role of epistemic dependence is also evident: people often trust the claims of religious leaders regarding matters of faith and doctrine, such as Abelia trusting her leader regarding set r .

Alongside these local communities, a broader notion of epistemic community also seems plausible. Consider when we talk about trusting scientists, the consensus of science, or that the propositions of set s represent the consensus of paleontologists. In the broad communities of scientists or paleontologists, the division of cognitive labor and systems of epistemic dependence are part of the business, and these groups engage in all sorts of epistemic practices to achieve their cognitive goals.

To make this distinction clearer, I distinguish between level 1 (local) and level 2 (practice-based) epistemic communities. This distinction helps clarify how testimonial relationships function differently across contexts, particularly between laypersons and experts, and why such differences are epistemically significant.

Level 1 epistemic communities are local, interactive groups wherein members typically maintain direct, personal relationships. These include families, classrooms, religious congregations, small research teams, or even group chats. Within these communities, information circulates through habitual, often informal exchanges—face-to-face conversation, trusted routine interaction, and embedded social norms. Trust is typically interpersonal and affectively grounded. These local groups play a crucial role in shaping the epistemic habits of their members: they mediate trust, frame what counts as credible testimony, and often serve as gatekeepers for information from the outside (cf. Greco 2021).

In contrast, level 2 epistemic communities are practice-based, non-localized networks constituted by participation in a shared domain of expertise, inquiry, ideology, or broad social practice. Members may never meet or know one another personally, yet they are bound together by shared cognitive goals, institutional standards, and epistemic norms. Scientific disciplines like evolutionary biology

and astrophysics are clear examples, where communication occurs through peer-reviewed publications, conferences, consensus documents, and replicable methodologies. But nonscientific and ideological communities can also form level 2 epistemic communities—such as flat-earthers or climate skeptics—so long as members share sources, standards, and a sense of epistemic allegiance.⁸

As we will see, there is an important distinction in how the epistemic practices of acknowledging and trusting the testimony of experts apply to each type of epistemic community.

Clash of Epistemic Norms

After characterizing some key concepts, we can now describe the doxastic crisis that many people face in matters of science and religion. Let's return to our hypothetical scenario in which Abelia holds beliefs that appear to her to form an inconsistent doxastic structure.

Let us add some elements to our initial picture. First, we could say that Abelia is an epistemic agent as long as she is an active part of various epistemic communities formed by all sources of information that she consults and relies on in her epistemic practices. Second, Abelia is a responsible epistemic agent, forming her beliefs by responding to the available evidence, always seeking the truth and avoiding falsehoods. Third, Abelia depends on various epistemic agents to form many of her most cherished beliefs. She recognizes various communities of experts (level 2 practice-based communities), such as scientists of many academic fields. Fourth, since she considers herself a layperson in many of these matters, she habitually defers her opinion to the opinion of the experts. As an epistemically responsible person, she knows that while full consensus is not always achievable in scientific disciplines, there is at least partial or broad consensus that represents the robust opinion of the vast majority of experts in practice-based communities.⁹ She acknowledges that this is the case with the propositions of set *s* and therefore believes in them. As I have explained, by deferring her opinion to the experts rather than being irresponsible, Abelia increases her chances of improving her epistemic standing.

At the same time, Abelia is a devoutly religious person. She regularly engages in spiritual exercises such as prayer and meditation, attends weekly church services, and holds her religious beliefs in high regard. Through her years as part of her church (a level 1 local epistemic community), she has learned the propositions of set *r* and believes them. Abelia is not an expert in religious matters; she trusts the minister and leadership of her church in matters related to faith. Thus, Abelia epistemically depends on other people for many of her religious beliefs. Assuming the minister of her church is a trustworthy person with a solid theological background, it seems Abelia is rational in deferring her beliefs, because her pastor and leadership believe and assert things such as *r*.

Saying Abelia is being rational in these cases means she is conforming her doxastic attitudes to some norm of rationality.¹⁰ Let us define the norm “proper deference”:

PROPDEF: a rational epistemic agent who is not an expert in a given domain should defer her beliefs to those who are experts in that domain.

This norm captures a basic principle of epistemic responsibility in a world shaped by the division of cognitive labor. However, PROPDEF is not an epistemic absolute. Like many norms of rationality, it should be understood as *pro tanto*: its authority holds under ordinary conditions but may be overridden when other epistemic considerations come into conflict. That is, deference to recognized expertise enhances epistemic standing *all else being equal*, but not unconditionally. This qualification becomes especially salient when agents are embedded in multiple epistemic communities, each offering authoritative testimony in domains that may overlap or conflict.

This is precisely Abelia’s situation. On the one hand, the scientific community she relies on is a well-established level 2 practice-based epistemic community, characterized by institutional mechanisms of review, discipline-specific norms, and structured methodological standards. The presence of broad expert consensus in this domain gives Abelia strong reasons to defer to their testimony concerning the propositions in set *s*.

On the other hand, her religious beliefs are formed within a level 1 local epistemic community—her religious community—whose authority is not merely relational or affective. Rather, Abelia takes her minister and the church leadership to be epistemically trustworthy: they follow the theological standards of her denomination, exhibit intellectual virtues such as honesty, careful interpretation, and contextual sensitivity, and are demonstrably knowledgeable in matters of doctrine and scripture. Her trust in them then is not merely a function of familiarity but of perceived epistemic competence within that religious domain.

In this light, Abelia’s positive doxastic attitudes toward both *s* and *r* appear to be in compliance with PROPDEF and therefore epistemically rational—at least when each source is considered independently.

There is, however, an issue that is becoming transparent to Abelia. She starts to realize that some propositions of set *s* are incompatible with some propositions of set *r*. It may be that this awareness emerged because someone told her about such incompatibility or through her own reflections. Either way, since Abelia believes in both sets of propositions, she sees an incompatibility within her belief system. Two problems arise from this realization.

First, there is a psychological problem. Abelia feels a cognitive discomfort for holding what seems to be incompatible beliefs. It is probable that, given such discomfort, she seeks to revise her belief system, either dropping some beliefs and/or acquiring new ones until she reaches a more cohesive psychological profile.¹¹

The second problem is epistemic. By holding seemingly inconsistent beliefs, Abelia is facing not only a psychological issue but also a normative one: she is violating a norm of rationality. Although epistemologists disagree on the exact role coherence must play in the justification of a belief system, it is safe to say they broadly agree that coherence is an important epistemic value or desideratum that should be pursued (cf. Alston 2005; Kornblith 1983; Plantinga 1993).¹² We could state it as the following norm:

COHERENCE: a rational epistemic agent ought to pursue a belief system in which beliefs cohere with each other, at least when the inconsistencies are recognizable upon reflection and have significant epistemic or practical stakes.

We can characterize Abelia's conflict from two angles. First, there is a doxastic conflict, since some of her beliefs in set *s* conflict (seemingly, for her) with some of her beliefs in set *r*. Secondly, there is a conflict between norms of rationality. On one side, it seems Abelia is being rational for conforming her doxastic attitudes to the norm of PROPDEF, since her beliefs in *s* and *r* derive from proper epistemic dependencies and trust in the appropriate epistemic authorities. On the other side, Abelia is violating COHERENCE, since she is holding inconsistent beliefs. This is an epistemic–normative conflict.

This normative conflict requires further refinement. The issue is not that the two norms inherently clash but that adhering to both can lead to a cognitive conflict when their outputs—what they prescribe in particular cases—result in apparent inconsistency. The conflict does not arise from a failure of deference but rather from the simultaneous success of deference within two domains whose outputs are, at least superficially, in tension. Second, the case portrayed has a diachronic dimension. Abelia obtains certain beliefs by deferring to experts at one point, only to later realize that these beliefs do not hang together aptly. But the fact that she, like everyone else, acquires and reflects on her beliefs over time does not imply that the regulatory role of epistemic norms is itself diachronic. PROPDEF and COHERENCE are relevant at every stage of inquiry. Third, epistemic norms typically include *ceteris paribus* clauses, meaning their normative force can vary in the presence of defeaters or circumstances that reduce their significance. Nonetheless, these two norms remain sufficiently pertinent for laypeople striving for rationality, well-formed beliefs, and an integrated cognitive system.

The doxastic conflict is broadly recognized and often explored in the literature. The epistemic–normative conflict, in turn, is a higher-order conflict, and it is harder to solve. It may be one salient factor to explain why cognitive crises such as that of Abelia are so deeply felt and hard to overcome. We can characterize Abelia’s predicament through the following dilemma: either (1) she is being irrational for violating COHERENCE and therefore must modify her belief system until she reaches a new, coherent belief system, but then, in modifying her belief system, she would abandon beliefs that were rationally formed (via PROPDEF); or (2) she is from the outset being rational for conforming to the norm of PROPDEF since she formed her beliefs soundly, but that would raise the question of how one could be rational violating COHERENCE, i.e., believing in inconsistent propositions. Should Abelia comply with PROPDEF or COHERENCE?

Four Asymmetries between Belief in Set *s* and Set *r*

While the content of the propositions in set *s* and set *r* clearly differ in nature, I so far have treated the beliefs in the propositions of these sets as akin in character. As we have seen, in cases such as Abelia’s, such beliefs correspond to positive doxastic attitudes based on trust in certain epistemic authorities relevant to each related epistemic community: scientific communities for scientific beliefs and religious communities for religious beliefs. There are nonetheless some possible asymmetries that can shed light on Abelia’s doxastic and normative conflicts. I now characterize four interconnected asymmetries.

Asymmetries

Asymmetry 1: Kind of Epistemic Community

As discussed, epistemic communities can be understood at different levels of comprehensiveness. Both *s* and *r* beliefs are often acquired within level 1 local epistemic communities. For instance, Abelia’s scientific beliefs were introduced and shaped through her school, a local epistemic community where she interacted with peers, teachers, and educational materials. However, the grounding of these beliefs extends beyond the school itself, as the curriculum was directly informed by the broader scientific consensus, represented by well-established level 2 practice-based epistemic communities, such as physicists, evolutionary biologists, and paleontologists.¹³

Similarly, Abelia’s beliefs in *r* were mostly acquired through her church, another level 1 local epistemic community where she interacts with fellow congregants and the leadership, such as pastors or elders. However, when considering religious beliefs related to the science-and-religion debate, the relevant level 2 practice-based epistemic communities are more complex than in science.

In the sciences, a given field—such as evolutionary biology or paleontology—functions as a relatively unified level 2 epistemic community, structured by shared methodologies, institutionalized mechanisms of knowledge production (e.g., peer review, replication studies), and broadly accepted criteria for evaluating claims. This unity ensures that when a local epistemic community, such as a school, teaches a scientific proposition, it is typically traceable to a well-established, consensus-forming level 2 scientific community.

Theology, as an academic discipline, operates similarly to the sciences in many respects: it employs rigorous methodologies, undergoes institutionalized peer review, and maintains structured frameworks for inquiry. What distinguishes religious epistemic communities from scientific ones is not the internal functioning of academic theology but the existence of multiple, sometimes competing, level 2 practice-based epistemic communities within religion.

Alongside academic theology, other independent level 2 epistemic communities—such as biblical studies—function as distinct sources of expertise, each employing its own disciplinary methods. Additionally, religious denominations and ecclesiastical institutions constitute yet another form of level 2 epistemic community, with their own mechanisms for generating consensus, often shaped by doctrinal commitments and historical traditions rather than purely academic inquiry.

I acknowledge that some scientific theories and concepts are not uniformly understood, even among experts. For instance, Lenny Moss (2003) has shown that the concept of “gene” is interpreted differently across scientific communities. My point, however, is not that all local scientific communities agree on every detail of their subject matter but rather that when a consensus emerges among scientists and their research groups—through institutional processes such as peer review and high-level publications—it is typically traceable to a single level 2 epistemic community: the practitioners of a specific discipline or field of inquiry. On the other hand, I also recognize that some theological claims enjoy strong consensus across faith communities—such as the belief in the existence of one God in both Judaism and Islam. However, my focus here is on religious claims that intersect with the science-and-religion debate, where multiple level 2 epistemic communities offer diverging interpretations.

This structural difference has significant epistemic implications. Abelia’s scientific beliefs are traceable to a unified and widely accepted level 2 epistemic community, but her religious beliefs in *r* lack such clarity. The existence of multiple, sometimes competing, level 2 epistemic communities within the religious domain means that even when a consensus emerges within one group—such as a theological tradition or a denomination—it is not necessarily shared by others or transparently communicated to local level 1 epistemic communities.¹⁴

In science, especially regarding well-established theories, prevailing consensus is relatively straightforward to recognize, and rationality demands deferring to it (e.g., van den Brink, de Ridder, and van Woudenberg 2017). In contrast, the absence of a single, overarching epistemic authority in religion complicates this process.¹⁵ Should Abelia defer to the doctrinal stance of her denomination, the theological interpretations of scholars at prominent universities, or the perspectives of experts in the science-and-religion field? This multiplicity opens religious beliefs—especially those related to science—up to greater interpretative flexibility and a less determinate sense of expert consensus.

Asymmetry 2: The Relationship between Deference and Understanding

Given the ever-increasing specialization of the natural sciences, even if a layperson attempts to think for herself instead of deferring to experts, they probably will not be able to do so successfully. After all, the competencies required to gather and evaluate evidence demand extensive background knowledge and years of specialized training (Haufe 2023; Polanyi 2015). Thus, the kind of trust laypeople place in the testimony of scientific communities seems to align with the basic model of testimony in epistemology: one receives testimony and accepts it simply by believing what she is being told (cf. Moran 2018).

But in the domain of religion, it seems laypeople are often encouraged to engage more actively with the content of their beliefs, seeking a level of understanding¹⁶ of doctrines and comparing different theological interpretations. Such understanding often includes grappling with the evidential basis of religious claims (such as the biblical basis that supports doctrines) and the criteria of justification (which are often exegetical and hermeneutical principles) and integrating beliefs into a coherent perspective of reality. While some religious doctrines—such as the doctrine of the Trinity—are acknowledged as mysteries beyond full human comprehension, many religious communities nonetheless emphasize the importance of theological reflection and personal understanding as a signs of spiritual maturity and commitment to faith.¹⁷

This asymmetry is not absolute, and I acknowledge that laypeople can gain some understanding of scientific theories through education, just as some religious claims are accepted with little comprehension. However, the difference is one of degree rather than kind. Scientific literacy campaigns aim to improve public understanding, but even well-informed laypeople typically lack the expertise to independently evaluate specialized scientific claims. In contrast, religious traditions often place value on believers developing at least a partial grasp of the interpretive frameworks that structure their faith commitments.

This difference has an important implication for how laypeople relate to experts. In science, the layperson's relationship with the expert is (or should be) that of expert-as-authority, in which the layperson defers to the epistemic

authority, and if their personal reasoning conflicts with expert consensus, rationality typically demands they override their own judgment in favor of the expert view (Brown 2025; Ahlstrom-Vij 2019; Zagzebski 2012). In certain religious contexts, by contrast, the layperson's relationship with the experts is framed as expert-as-teacher, where the goal is not merely to transmit knowledge but to foster deep engagement and comprehension (De Cruz 2019, 54). It is important to highlight that, as I argue, this asymmetry applies only to types of religious claims—particularly those open to interpretative reasoning—rather than to all religious beliefs. Some religious beliefs work similarly to scientific ones.

Asymmetry 3: The Role of Belief in One's Belief System

A hasty conclusion from the two previous asymmetries would be that, to solve Abelia's doxastic and epistemic plight, she should simply abandon her belief in the propositions of set r until her belief system reaches internal coherence. However, besides the fact that Abelia's positive doxastic attitudes conform to a norm of rationality (PROPDEF), there is another relevant element regarding the nature of religious beliefs that should prompt one to at least ponder the feasibility of suggesting Abelia should abandon her religious beliefs.

For that, we can draw on Lara Buchak's risky-commitment account of faith. According to Buchak, faith is not a belief without sufficient evidence. Rather, it is a rational commitment to treat a proposition as true in action and reasoning, even in the face of epistemic uncertainty (Buchak 2017). A person has faith in a proposition when she cares about its truth, has a positive stance toward it, and is willing to take risks by continuing to act on it despite potential counterevidence. This form of faith is not irrational stubbornness but a context-sensitive response that can preserve rational agency in the face of limited or inconclusive evidence, particularly when abandoning a belief would dismantle long-standing interpretive frameworks or life projects.

In *Faith and Traditions*, Buchak (2021) extends this model to explain how individuals rationally adhere to, or break from, religious and moral traditions. She identifies three common features of tradition-guided doxastic life: recalcitrance (resistance to counterevidence), gestalt effects (different conclusions from shared evidence), and conversion (sudden shifts in doxastic orientation). On her view, these features are not signs of irrationality but flow naturally from the structure of rational faith. When an individual's prior commitment to a tradition is strong and based on longstanding, socially reinforced evidence, counterevidence often pushes their credence into a middling zone rather than decisively refuting the core claims. In such cases, a continued positive doxastic attitude can remain rational because of the benefits of sustained commitment, such as action guidance and participation in communal practices. This helps explain why religious believers may rationally retain doctrinal commitments

without epistemic fault, even when they face scientific knowledge that seems to conflict with their commitments.

This framework aligns closely with Abelia's case. Her commitment to certain religious doctrines can be understood as a form of rational faith: one that resists the pressure to suspend belief not because she is ignoring counterevidence but because she judges that the tradition to which she is committed remains epistemically serious. Thus, even if Abelia's beliefs in the propositions of set s are seen as counterevidence to the propositions of r , Abelia could still rationally have faith in r . Religious traditions, moreover, do not operate in the abstract. They are typically embedded in level 2 epistemic communities and are lived, transmitted, and enacted through level 1 communities, such as local congregations. It is within these more immediate social spaces that individuals like Abelia experience the authority of their tradition: through trusted exemplars, interpretive habits, and embodied modes of understanding. As Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood (2007, 183) argue, it is intellectually beneficial or virtuous to hold firmly certain doxastic commitments that possess a structural role in one's belief system, since such beliefs are fundamental for an agent's capacity to perform epistemic practices and inquiries that require significant time and effort. What Buchak's model contributes to this picture is a formal articulation of how continued positive epistemic attitudes under tension, particularly within traditions, can remain rational.

Asymmetry 4: The Layered Meaning of Propositions

From asymmetry 3, we have seen that discarding religious beliefs is not easy, at least for someone who still wants to embrace their religious identity. Furthermore, discussing the first asymmetry, I showed that a norm like PROPDEF demands Abelia defer her scientific opinions to the broad consensus of the scientific communities. In religious matters, in turn, things are not so clear. While Abelia's level 1 local epistemic community can be unbending regarding the truth of the propositions of r , when we broaden the scope to include level 2 practice-based religious epistemic communities (for example, the communities of theologians or biblical scholars), we encounter various kinds of disagreements.

These disagreements seem to stem from at least two sources. First, theologians and biblical scholars may hold theoretical commitments that are radically distinct. Second, even religious authorities who share the same doctrinal commitments can have distinct interpretations of the meanings of the propositions of set r .

This difference in the interpretation of meanings does not seem to impinge, at least at the same level, on scientific propositions.¹⁸ Scientific propositions appear, in a more or less straightforward manner, to describe states of affairs that have a clear or univocal meaning: either "the Earth is around 4,5 billion years old," or it is not; either "traits such as predation and violence are part of animal behavior much before *Homo sapiens* emerged," or they are not, etc. The

propositions of r , in turn, encompass multiple possible interpretations, given that they represent not merely states of affairs or facts but theological dimensions and meanings. For instance, the proposition “the universe was created by God as described in the book of Genesis” can signify different things depending on how one interprets the book of Genesis, and the meaning of the proposition “Adam and Eve were the first human beings” depends on how one understands the words “first” and “human beings” in this context.

Criteria (Desiderata) for Abelia’s Course of Action

From the discussion of these asymmetries, I defend that there are four criteria, or desiderata, that constrain Abelia’s course of action if she is to improve her epistemic standing. First, given that epistemic individualism is out of the question, PROPDEF remains a normative necessity. Second, especially based on discussions regarding the first two asymmetries, beliefs toward scientific consensus are relatively fixed for the layperson, i.e., a layperson must defer to the scientific expert consensus. Third, especially regarding the third asymmetry, religious beliefs should be maintained if possible, or at least not be immediately dismissed for the sake of COHERENCE. Fourth, particularly derived from the fourth asymmetry, while scientific propositions typically have one clear meaning, religious claims encompass multiple interpretations, especially those within the realm of theological theories; thus, changing the interpretation of a theological theory is a feasible move for a religious person committed to epistemic rationality.

A comment is pertinent on a possible incompatibility between the third and fourth desiderata. After all, desideratum 3 can be (simplistically) read as “maintain religious belief!” while desideratum 4 can be read as “change religious belief!” To solve this apparent tension, a conceptual sensitivity will be helpful. Benno van den Toren (2018) suggests an important distinction between a doctrine and a theological theory. Doctrines, such as the ones contained in the Apostles’ Creed, represent stable views that typically demand from believers a dogmatic attitude of acceptance. Theological theories, on the other hand, encompass the various interpretations a given doctrine entails. For example, original sin is a doctrine that affirms the universality and pervasiveness of the sinful condition; however, questions regarding how it started, with whom it started, how it is transmitted, etc., are subject to diverse apt interpretations (e.g., Augustinian versus Irenaean perspectives). Hence, resuming our discussion of asymmetries, we could state that for a religious believer, doctrines work similarly to scientific propositions and must be accepted as testimony from the proper epistemic authority (expert-as-authority). Theological theories, on the other hand, are more open to change, allowing believers to explore alternatives and adjust their interpretations (expert-as-teacher).

Thus, to summarize our four criteria or desiderata:

1. Epistemic dependencies are unavoidable: PROPDEF is a normative necessity.
2. A layperson's dependence on scientific propositions ideally aligns with the expert-as-authority model: she believes in the proper scientific testimony.
3. A religious layperson's dependence on religious doctrines ideally aligns with the expert-as-authority model: she believes in the doctrine.
4. A religious layperson can adjust her theological theories by trusting in and depending on other religious authorities who offer distinct interpretations.

Tentative Steps toward a Resolution of the Epistemic Dilemma

My primary goal has been to characterize the cognitive crisis epistemic agents, such as Abelia, face when holding seemingly incompatible scientific and religious beliefs. In this final section, I tentatively present some steps a rational agent could take to address their cognitive situation. The aim here is not to prescribe what all religious believers ought to do but rather to illuminate a range of rationally viable responses available to nonexperts like Abelia when confronted with deep doxastic conflict.

Four Options

In light of her situation, we can enumerate four main options Abelia faces. First, since following PROPDEF in her processes of belief formation resulted in an incompatible belief system, she could discard PROPDEF as a relevant norm, suspend her belief in the propositions of sets s and r , and independently begin an inquiry to determine in which propositions to believe. However, the time and cognitive effort required to accomplish such a task are dauntingly hard to obtain for any rational agent, no matter how committed they are. Furthermore, this move violates desideratum 1.

A second option, based on Buchak's model as discussed in the third asymmetry, is for Abelia to bifurcate her doxastic attitudes into two directions: *believing* in the propositions of set s and *having faith* in the propositions of set r . Although distinct forms of doxastic attitudes, the relationships among one person's beliefs and faiths is contentious. If one embraces a dualistic version in which faith and belief come completely apart, then one could suggest Abelia becomes a member of an equally dualistic religious community, defending a radical nonoverlapping nature among scientific and religious propositions (cf. Gould 2002; Howard-Snyder 2016). While this position does not seem to conflict with the four desiderata, it has important limitations. While faith comes with additional volitional and emotional components (e.g., Preston-Roedder 2018), it still retains the cognitive element that, in cases like Abelia's, conflicts with other doxastic attitudes.

Another option is to suspend judgment when faced with competing epistemic authorities of roughly equal credibility. This is, in fact, a well-established epistemic strategy in cases of underdetermination or conflict, and it can preserve coherence when adopting a firm doxastic stance on either side would introduce contradiction. In that sense, a wholesale suspension of judgment is a genuine candidate for rational resolution in situations like Abelia's. However, the cases I am investigating concern agents who are not merely navigating abstract epistemic puzzles but are instead trying to preserve a lived religious identity. For such agents, suspending judgment about central theological doctrines would not feel like a temporary withholding of assent but rather like a renunciation of faith itself. As such, the kind of wholesale suspension of belief that might resolve epistemic tension at a purely theoretical level would not be a live option for the kind of case I am examining.

That said, a form of selective suspension may still be epistemically and personally viable. While Abelia may not be willing to suspend belief in core theological doctrines—such as divine creation or the meaningfulness of divine action—she may find it rational to suspend judgment regarding specific theological doctrines that conflict with well-supported scientific claims. For example, she might withhold commitment to a literalist interpretation of Genesis without abandoning belief in creation itself. This kind of targeted epistemic withholding can create space for doxastic reconfiguration while maintaining the integrity of one's religious identity. It allows the agent to revise or reinterpret certain commitments without destabilizing central ones. This form of selective suspension also provides a natural transition into the next, fourth course of action.

Fourth, Abelia could still adhere to PROPDEF, acknowledging the unavoidability of epistemic dependences (cf. desideratum 1), but she could now change to whom she defers her religious opinions (satisfying desideratum 2). She could seek out religious authorities, for instance, who interpret the propositions of r in a manner that is less antagonistic toward scientific propositions, adding a set of auxiliary beliefs that make the propositions of r more science-friendly (cf. desideratum 4).¹⁹ But even if this option seems more commendable than the previous ones, a core issue remains: If Abelia cannot inquire into things for herself until she is able to decide which propositions to believe, how could she gain sufficient knowledge to decide which authority to defer to? As Neil Levy (2025) and others have argued, the very capacity to identify experts requires expertise.

Let me tentatively indicate a possible course of action for epistemic agents in situations similar to Abelia's who think the fourth option is the better one. The issue is that Abelia *individually* experiences a doxastic conflict that is deeply *socially* embedded. Her personal conflict stems, substantially, from her epistemic dependencies. Furthermore, it seems that such dependencies cannot be avoided.

For that reason, any simple appeal to actions or intellectual virtues that Abelia could exercise to decide for herself—either to determine which propositions to believe or which authority to trust—seems to obscure the problem rather than solve it. But that does not imply that Abelia and other epistemic agents cannot engage in thoughtful reflection or take some sort of action. After all, the very notion of epistemic agency refers to the agential properties humans possess in their capacity as knowers. I propose that epistemic agents can reconsider, in limited but significant ways, their stances toward their various epistemic communities. Let me now unpack this claim.

Responsible Agency through Calibrating Epistemic Dependencies

Once Abelia recognizes herself to be in a doxastic conflict and decides to move forward, the next step is to ask questions about all sorts of things, including the quality of her epistemic dependencies and the epistemic communities she's part of. After all, cognitive uneasiness prompts questions. Such questions can lead her to elicit some important information (Watson 2018), such as the existence of various kinds of disagreements among religious authorities, and the realization that some theological interpretations are more science-friendly than others. At this point of her inquiry, a form of selective suspension of judgment, as pointed out in the previous section, may take place.

She could then reconsider two main things concerning her epistemic communities.²⁰ Remember that I have broken down epistemic communities into two distinct levels. Level 1 comprises local epistemic communities characterized by the mutual acknowledgment of membership and typically personal relationships that ground mutual trust, and level 2 consists of practice-based epistemic communities, such as professional communities. In light of this, Abelia could make changes in her approaches, for instance, by increasing her acquaintance with the perspectives of other religious authorities and theological experts from various religious communities. This would mean broadening her epistemic memberships and informational channels to encompass other voices she deems reliable or worthy of attention.

Further, she could explore other level 1 local epistemic communities that share similar doctrinal commitments (cf. desideratum 3) but offer different theological interpretations of r (cf. desideratum 4). Including such voices in her epistemic community could alter the direction of her epistemic dependencies, leading toward a doxastic structure that is less incoherent. PROPDEF remains a relevant norm (cf. desideratum 1), but since its inputs change, so do the outputs. An outright concern is that broadening one's pool of information through new dependencies could increase confusion rather than mitigate it. It could lead one to face the enormous existing amount of religious diversity and disagreement, or, on the science side, lead one to consider deniers and conspirators.²¹

To alleviate these concerns, remember that Abelia is not revising dependencies on the science side, since she already trusts the consensus of scientific communities rather than individual opinions (cf. desideratum 2). In terms of religion, one safer movement would be to pursue alternative religious voices that possess similar doctrinal commitments (cf. desideratum 3).

Nonetheless, remodeling one's epistemic memberships and dependencies can go wrong in several ways, but that is a peril all thinkers face. Ultimately, the quality of this movement will depend partly on Abelia's intellectual capacities and virtues (Zagzebski 1996; Roberts and Wood 2007) and partly on environmental luck (Boyd 2020). Particularly important seem virtues related to trust, i.e., competencies allocating one's epistemic trust (McCraw 2020). Further, we can stipulate the value of a virtue like intellectual fellowship, a competence in selecting one's level 1 local epistemic communities and allocating trust in one's level 2 practice-based epistemic communities.

Conclusion

The cognitive crisis faced by epistemic agents like Abelia, stemming from seemingly incompatible scientific and religious beliefs, demands careful consideration and action. Given that rationality demands a more stable dependence on level 2 practice-based epistemic communities, Abelia can reevaluate her other epistemic communities and dependencies. By inhabiting new local communities, she can cultivate trusting relationships with peers and authorities who can provide her with fresh theological perspectives. Additionally, by expanding and/or altering her interlocutors to include diverse voices and exploring alternative interpretations, she can acquire new modes of epistemic dependence. Following these adjustments to her epistemic communities, adhering to PROPDEF can yield new outcomes, achieving a doxastic structure that approaches the ideal of COHERENCE. This process involves practicing social and intellectual virtues such as inquisitiveness, proper trust, and intellectual fellowship. While not offering a definitive resolution, this approach furnishes a framework for epistemic agents to actively address their socially rooted cognitive challenges.

As a final note, I acknowledge that shifting one's epistemic dependencies and intellectual memberships, no matter how rational or virtuous one aims to be, is relative to, and substantially induced by, one's previous trusting habits and preferences (cf. Levy 2025). Thus, my tentative suggestion for individuals like Abelia is a modest one, since there is no fully independent ground, apart from one's current epistemic commitments and dependencies, from which one can evaluate and decide on other dependencies. Thus, suggesting the cultivation of virtues like proper trust and intellectual fellowship, while not adding much to solve Abelia's predicament, points in the right direction.

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Notes

- ¹ See, for instance, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/trend/archive/winter-2021/on-the-intersection-of-science-and-religion>.
- ² While Abelia is a hypothetical figure, the epistemic tensions she embodies reflect patterns observed in real-world religious communities. For example, Esther Chan and Elaine Howard Ecklund (2016) document how evangelical and mainline Protestant lay believers navigate apparent conflicts between scriptural and scientific authorities, often developing hybrid strategies for reconciling these domains.
- ³ Strictly speaking, sets r and s are not logically contradictory, but in straightforward interpretations of them held by many ordinary believers, they do conflict.
- ⁴ Philosophers as old as Thomas Reid in the eighteenth century already defended the idea that testimony is a fundamental source of knowledge, emphasizing our natural dependence on others in acquiring beliefs. See Terence Cuneo and René van Woudenberg (2004).
- ⁵ As Hanna Kiri Gunn (2020, 562) puts it, epistemic dependence ensues when one epistemic subject's belief regulation—i.e., the “processes of forming, updating, and abandoning beliefs”—is assessed by appealing to the role some other agent—to whom she depends—plays in her beliefs' formation or maintenance. See also Sanford Goldberg (2020, 420).
- ⁶ As Jonathan Matheson (2024, 24) defines it, “evidence that concerns other people.”
- ⁷ For some approaches to this theme, see Marcelo Cabral (2024), Sanford Goldberg (2020), John Greco (2020), Hanna Kiri Gunn (2020), Martin Kusch (2002), and Luis Oliveira (2022).
- ⁸ Such level distinctions, however, are not always clear-cut, particularly in light of the powerful phenomenon of online communities. For instance, our online behaviors (such as likes and dislikes, time spent on specific sources, etc.), tracked and reinforced by algorithms, create certain online communities composed of the profiles and informational sources we engage with most. These online communities do not fit neatly within the level divisions. Even when flagged experts exist within an online community, their expertise is often hard to verify. These online communities function as if they were local communities, in that trust is largely unreflective, and the attribution of expertise is not governed by practice-based, authenticated norms.
- ⁹ A detailed analysis of the different types of consensus among experts is offered by Jonathan Matheson, Scott McElreath, and Nathan Nobis (2018).
- ¹⁰ Epistemic norms are those that “govern what we ought to say, do, or think from *an epistemic point of view*, from the point of view of promoting true belief and avoiding error” (Graham 2015, 247). Concerning the more general notion of normative reason, see Raz (2002) and Parfit (2011).
- ¹¹ Some believers may, instead of feeling troubled by the apparent inconsistency between their religious and scientific beliefs, embrace a form of chimeric epistemology (cf. Kitcher 2011), in which their religious trust trumps their scientific allegiances. My account, however, focuses on subjects who are not prone to embrace chimeric epistemology, as they trust scientific communities and experts.
- ¹² Of course, some degree of doxastic incoherence is very often tolerated in practice, especially in frontier domains such as physics, where incompatible theories coexist without immediate resolution (e.g., quantum mechanics and general relativity). However, Abelia's case is different.

The conflict she experiences is not an isolated theoretical anomaly but a clash of domain-level commitments with strong normative pull.

- ¹³ There are areas and subjects in the sciences where consensus is far from obvious. However, the kinds of scientific claims I address in this article, such as those in *s*, are consensual.
- ¹⁴ These patterns of epistemic deference are reflected in empirical and philosophical research on lay belief formation. For instance, Helen De Cruz (2020) argues that laypeople often defer to scientific or religious authorities not through rigorous evidence assessment but via a process of “believing to belong” anchored in community trust and identity signaling. This underscores this article’s distinction between domains: while both science and religion involve testimonial uptake, the institutional frameworks governing deference differ considerably.
- ¹⁵ Religious communities generally lack a unified epistemic authority capable of coordinating belief across contexts. Even in traditions like Roman Catholicism, where such authority is formally claimed, ambiguity persists. Doctrinal texts can be vague, and it is often unclear whether deference should be directed to the pope, academic theologians, or biblical scholars.
- ¹⁶ For an overview of various conceptions of understanding, see Michael Hannon (2021) and Jeroen de Ridder (2024).
- ¹⁷ The asymmetry I describe is observable in empirical settings. Helen De Cruz (2024), for example, presents evidence from recent survey research showing that Christian laypeople differ widely in how they interpret the compatibility of evolution with biblical teachings, depending on denominational norms and hermeneutic approaches. Such intra-Christian epistemic disagreement highlights the more decentralized nature of religious deference.
- ¹⁸ René van Woudenberg (2021) argues that propositions in the disciplines of the humanities (which, for him, include theology) possess more meanings than those of the natural sciences and therefore accommodate more valid interpretations. Even seemingly straightforward religious claims are typically the result of interpretative traditions. For instance, the belief that the Earth is 6,000 years old arises from a particular reading of Genesis and biblical genealogies rather than a direct scriptural assertion.
- ¹⁹ One might ask why an epistemic agent should seek a religious community that accommodates scientific findings rather than a scientific community that accommodates their religious views. As I have argued, while scientific consensus can be contested, the mechanisms for achieving it—such as peer review, empirical testing, and disciplinary boundaries—tend to be more standardized than those in religious traditions, where theological authority is often dispersed across multiple interpretive traditions, particularly when dealing with theological theories rather than doctrines. When attempting to identify which religious community represents the consensus on, for example, the specific interpretation of the meaning of Adam and Eve, one might consider a particular denomination’s confession of faith as well as the academic communities of theologians, biblical scholars, and others.
- ²⁰ Real-world parallels to Abelia’s epistemic realignment are documented in sociological literature. For instance, Tatiana Tiaynen-Qadir et al. (2021) report that religious individuals in Nordic institutional contexts frequently navigate science–faith tensions by shifting theological commitments or affiliating with alternative communities that provide more epistemic stability.
- ²¹ This problem is similar to one discussed by Levy (2022), who argues that a dogmatic attitude is often epistemically more beneficial than an open-minded attitude.

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