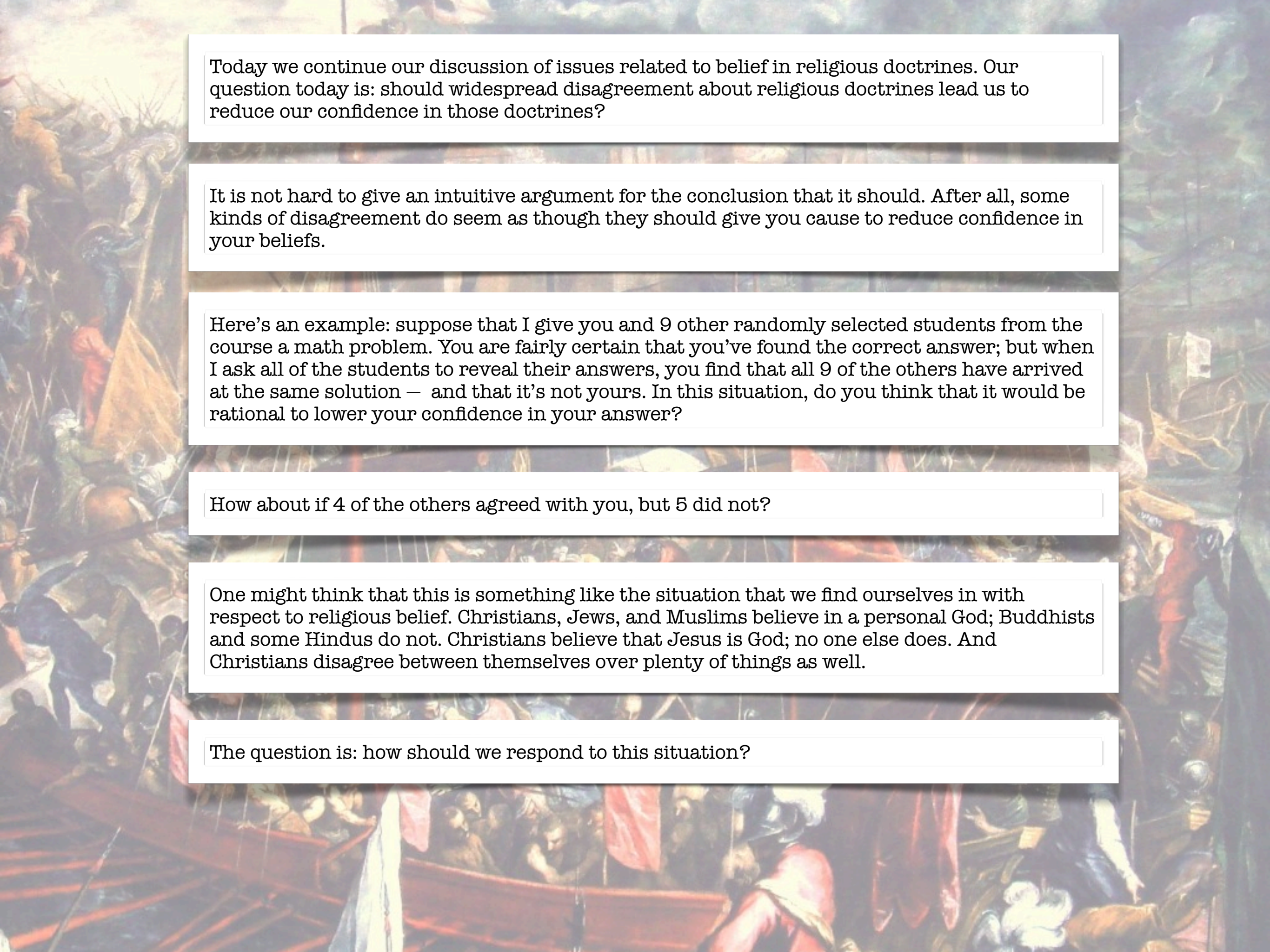




Religious disagreement





Today we continue our discussion of issues related to belief in religious doctrines. Our question today is: should widespread disagreement about religious doctrines lead us to reduce our confidence in those doctrines?

It is not hard to give an intuitive argument for the conclusion that it should. After all, some kinds of disagreement do seem as though they should give you cause to reduce confidence in your beliefs.

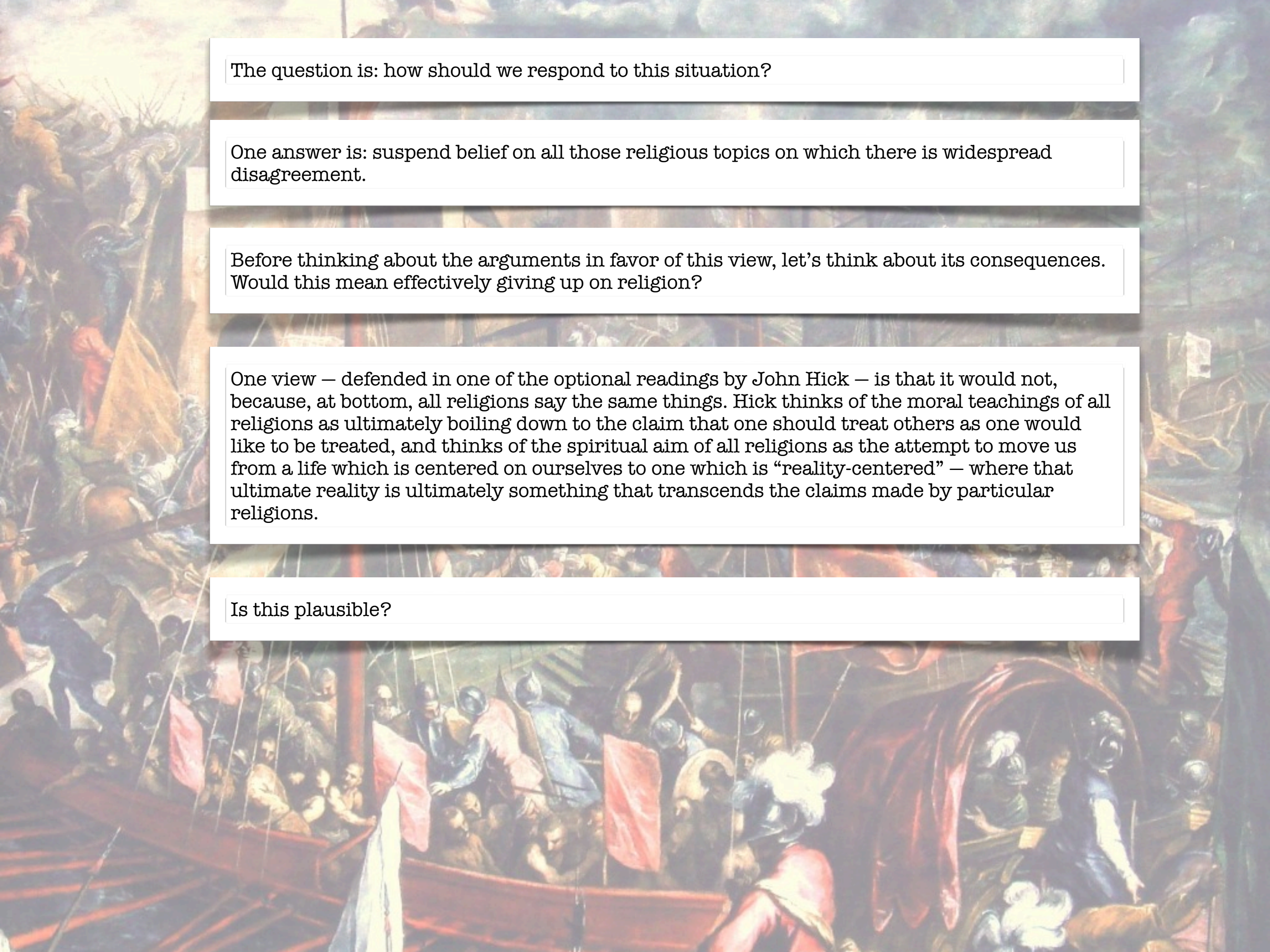
Here's an example: suppose that I give you and 9 other randomly selected students from the course a math problem. You are fairly certain that you've found the correct answer; but when I ask all of the students to reveal their answers, you find that all 9 of the others have arrived at the same solution — and that it's not yours. In this situation, do you think that it would be rational to lower your confidence in your answer?

How about if 4 of the others agreed with you, but 5 did not?

One might think that this is something like the situation that we find ourselves in with respect to religious belief. Christians, Jews, and Muslims believe in a personal God; Buddhists and some Hindus do not. Christians believe that Jesus is God; no one else does. And Christians disagree between themselves over plenty of things as well.

The question is: how should we respond to this situation?





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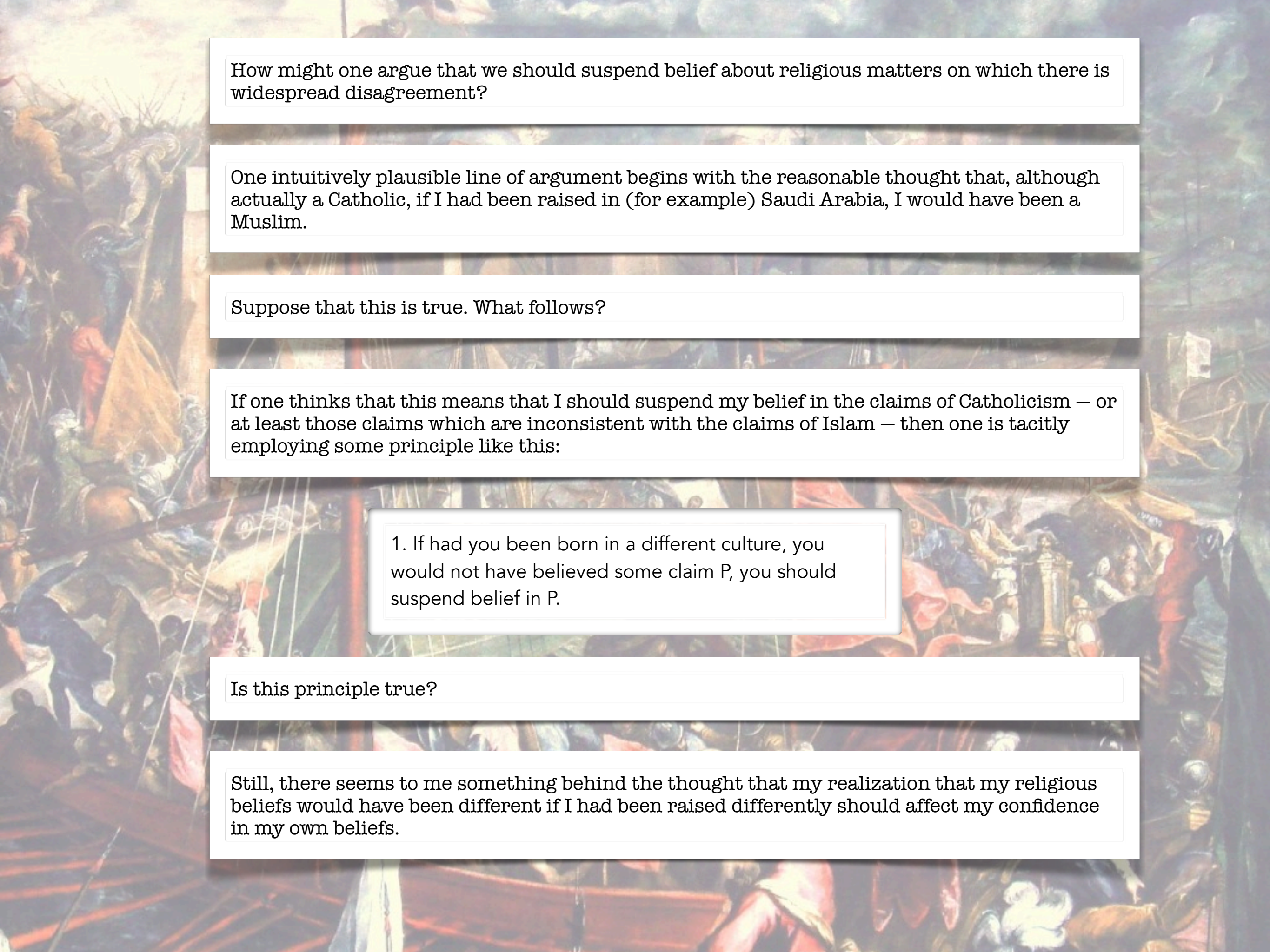
One answer is: suspend belief on all those religious topics on which there is widespread disagreement.

Before thinking about the arguments in favor of this view, let's think about its consequences. Would this mean effectively giving up on religion?

One view – defended in one of the optional readings by John Hick – is that it would not, because, at bottom, all religions say the same things. Hick thinks of the moral teachings of all religions as ultimately boiling down to the claim that one should treat others as one would like to be treated, and thinks of the spiritual aim of all religions as the attempt to move us from a life which is centered on ourselves to one which is “reality-centered” – where that ultimate reality is ultimately something that transcends the claims made by particular religions.

Is this plausible?





How might one argue that we should suspend belief about religious matters on which there is widespread disagreement?

One intuitively plausible line of argument begins with the reasonable thought that, although actually a Catholic, if I had been raised in (for example) Saudi Arabia, I would have been a Muslim.

Suppose that this is true. What follows?

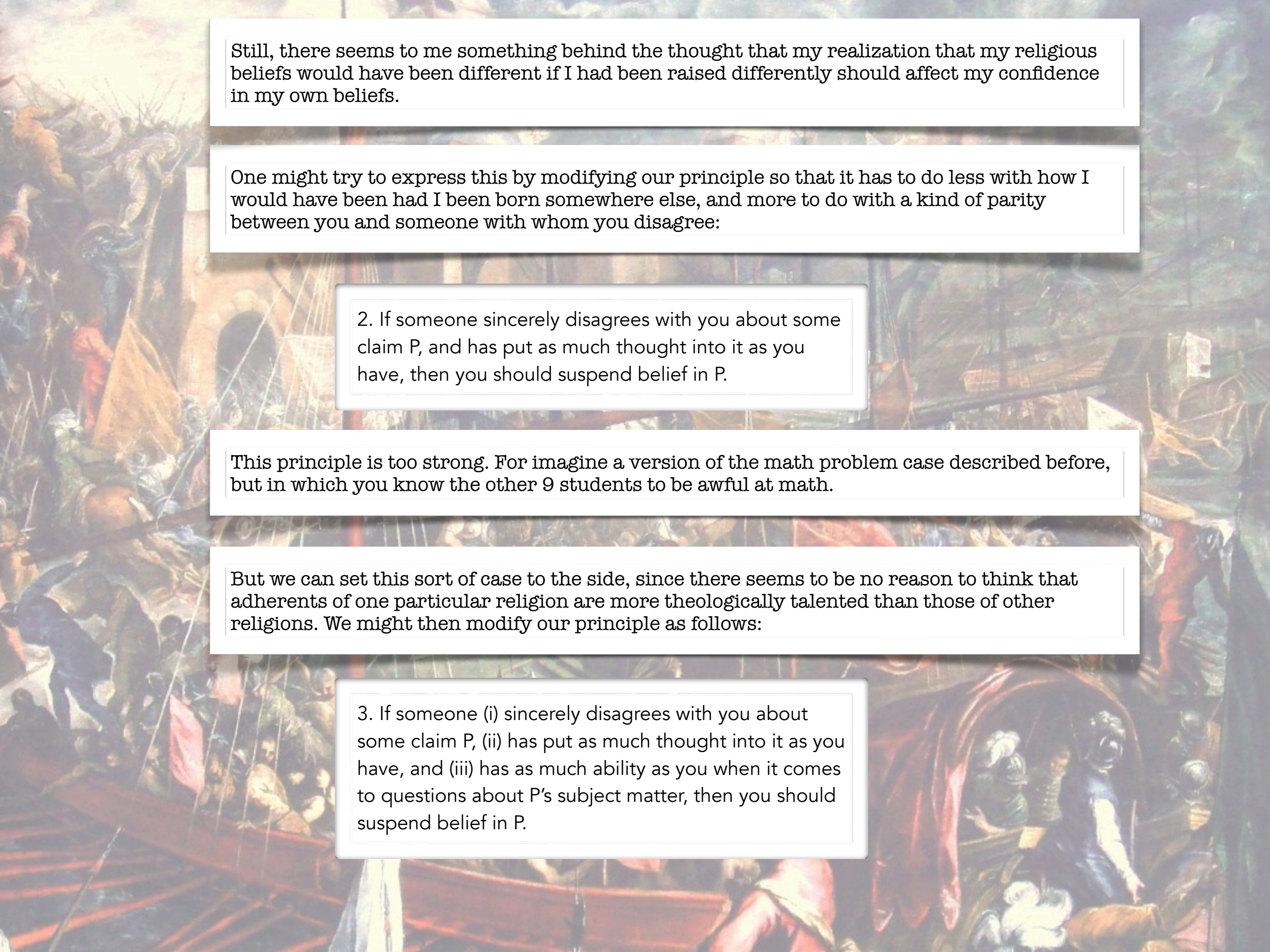
If one thinks that this means that I should suspend my belief in the claims of Catholicism – or at least those claims which are inconsistent with the claims of Islam – then one is tacitly employing some principle like this:

1. If had you been born in a different culture, you would not have believed some claim P, you should suspend belief in P.

Is this principle true?

Still, there seems to me something behind the thought that my realization that my religious beliefs would have been different if I had been raised differently should affect my confidence in my own beliefs.





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One might try to express this by modifying our principle so that it has to do less with how I would have been had I been born somewhere else, and more to do with a kind of parity between you and someone with whom you disagree:

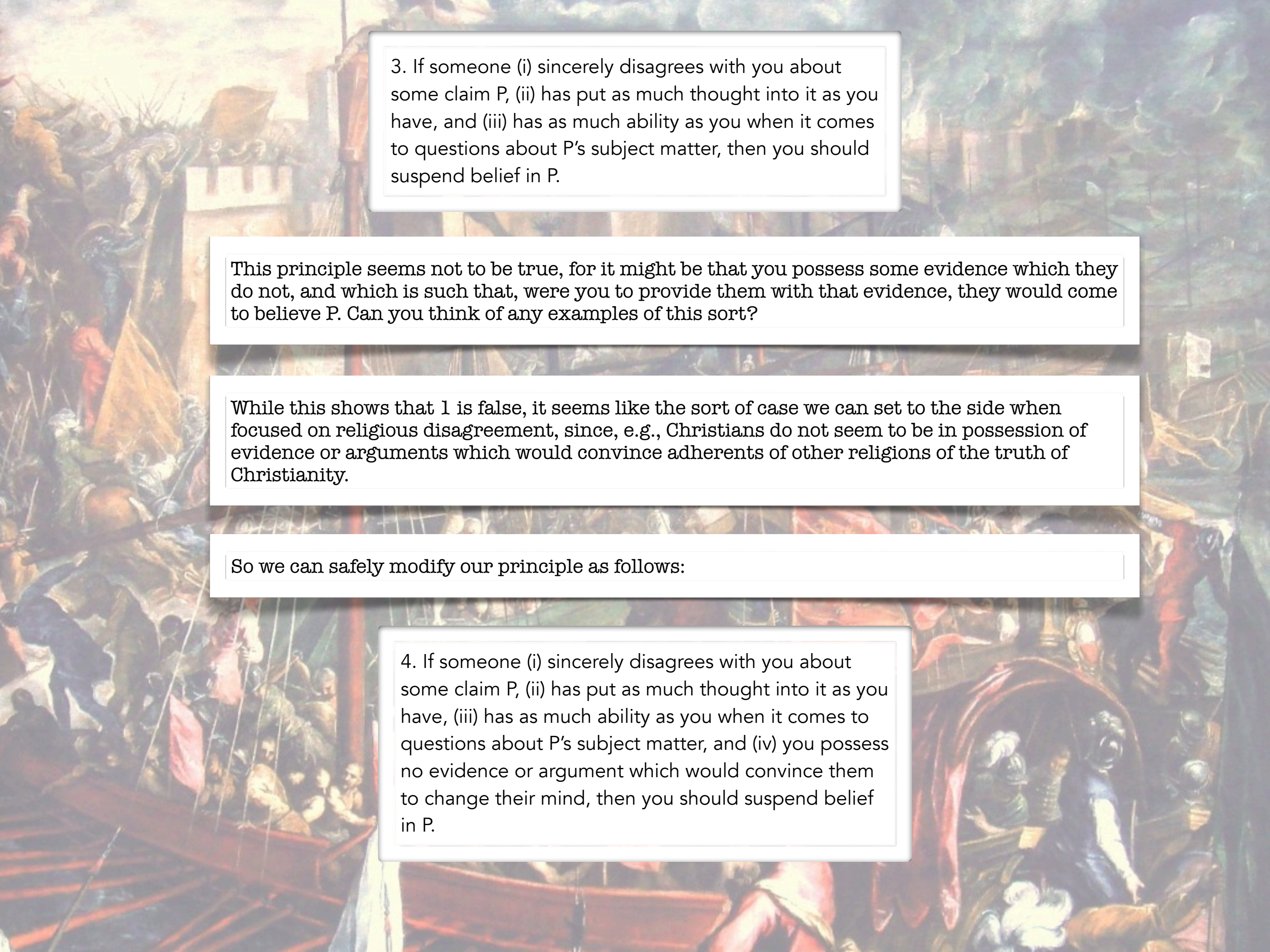
2. If someone sincerely disagrees with you about some claim  $P$ , and has put as much thought into it as you have, then you should suspend belief in  $P$ .

This principle is too strong. For imagine a version of the math problem case described before, but in which you know the other 9 students to be awful at math.

But we can set this sort of case to the side, since there seems to be no reason to think that adherents of one particular religion are more theologically talented than those of other religions. We might then modify our principle as follows:

3. If someone (i) sincerely disagrees with you about some claim  $P$ , (ii) has put as much thought into it as you have, and (iii) has as much ability as you when it comes to questions about  $P$ 's subject matter, then you should suspend belief in  $P$ .





3. If someone (i) sincerely disagrees with you about some claim P, (ii) has put as much thought into it as you have, and (iii) has as much ability as you when it comes to questions about P's subject matter, then you should suspend belief in P.

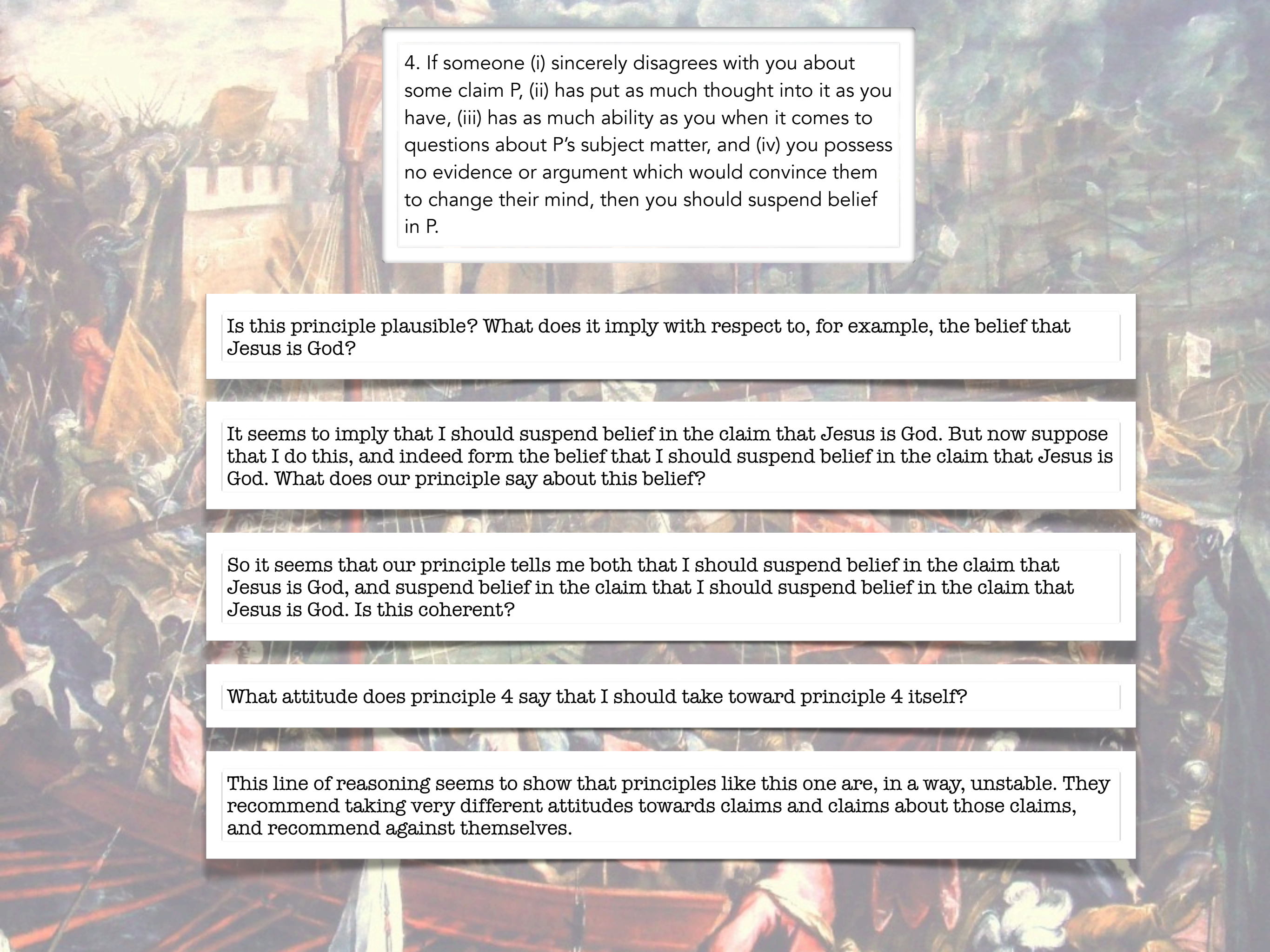
This principle seems not to be true, for it might be that you possess some evidence which they do not, and which is such that, were you to provide them with that evidence, they would come to believe P. Can you think of any examples of this sort?

While this shows that 1 is false, it seems like the sort of case we can set to the side when focused on religious disagreement, since, e.g., Christians do not seem to be in possession of evidence or arguments which would convince adherents of other religions of the truth of Christianity.

So we can safely modify our principle as follows:

4. If someone (i) sincerely disagrees with you about some claim P, (ii) has put as much thought into it as you have, (iii) has as much ability as you when it comes to questions about P's subject matter, and (iv) you possess no evidence or argument which would convince them to change their mind, then you should suspend belief in P.





4. If someone (i) sincerely disagrees with you about some claim P, (ii) has put as much thought into it as you have, (iii) has as much ability as you when it comes to questions about P's subject matter, and (iv) you possess no evidence or argument which would convince them to change their mind, then you should suspend belief in P.

Is this principle plausible? What does it imply with respect to, for example, the belief that Jesus is God?

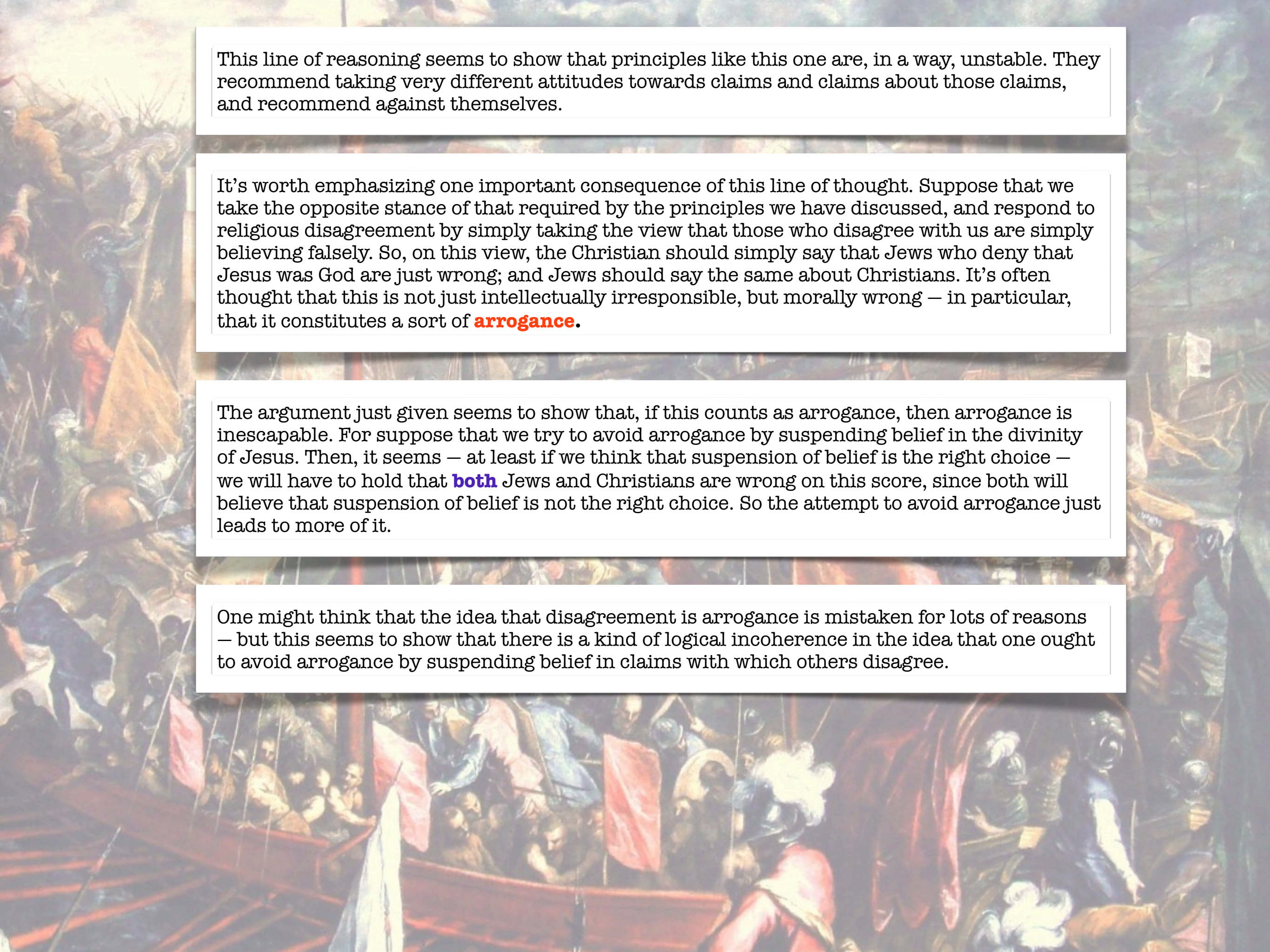
It seems to imply that I should suspend belief in the claim that Jesus is God. But now suppose that I do this, and indeed form the belief that I should suspend belief in the claim that Jesus is God. What does our principle say about this belief?

So it seems that our principle tells me both that I should suspend belief in the claim that Jesus is God, and suspend belief in the claim that I should suspend belief in the claim that Jesus is God. Is this coherent?

What attitude does principle 4 say that I should take toward principle 4 itself?

This line of reasoning seems to show that principles like this one are, in a way, unstable. They recommend taking very different attitudes towards claims and claims about those claims, and recommend against themselves.





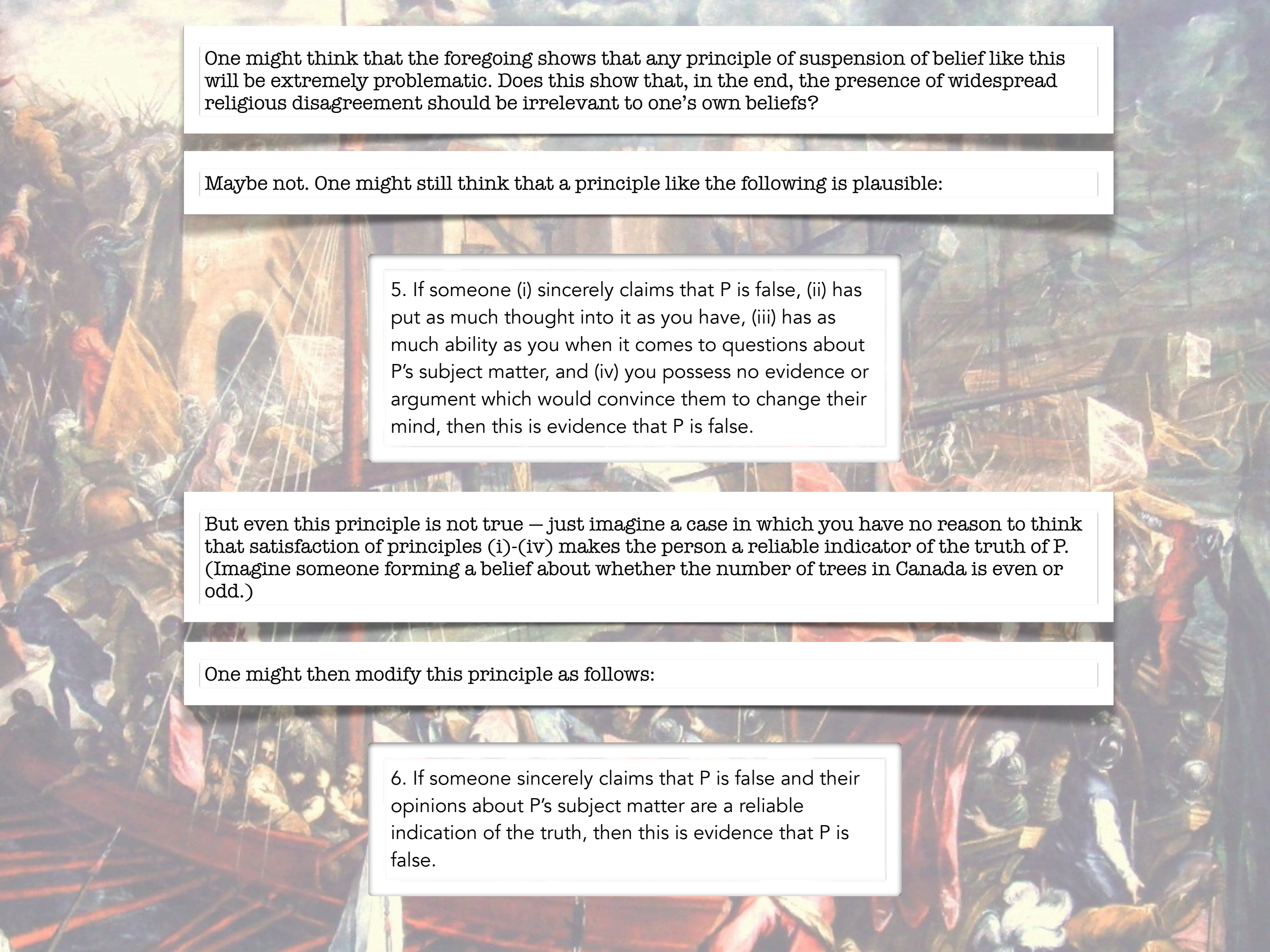
This line of reasoning seems to show that principles like this one are, in a way, unstable. They recommend taking very different attitudes towards claims and claims about those claims, and recommend against themselves.

It's worth emphasizing one important consequence of this line of thought. Suppose that we take the opposite stance of that required by the principles we have discussed, and respond to religious disagreement by simply taking the view that those who disagree with us are simply believing falsely. So, on this view, the Christian should simply say that Jews who deny that Jesus was God are just wrong; and Jews should say the same about Christians. It's often thought that this is not just intellectually irresponsible, but morally wrong – in particular, that it constitutes a sort of **arrogance**.

The argument just given seems to show that, if this counts as arrogance, then arrogance is inescapable. For suppose that we try to avoid arrogance by suspending belief in the divinity of Jesus. Then, it seems – at least if we think that suspension of belief is the right choice – we will have to hold that **both** Jews and Christians are wrong on this score, since both will believe that suspension of belief is not the right choice. So the attempt to avoid arrogance just leads to more of it.

One might think that the idea that disagreement is arrogance is mistaken for lots of reasons – but this seems to show that there is a kind of logical incoherence in the idea that one ought to avoid arrogance by suspending belief in claims with which others disagree.





One might think that the foregoing shows that any principle of suspension of belief like this will be extremely problematic. Does this show that, in the end, the presence of widespread religious disagreement should be irrelevant to one's own beliefs?

Maybe not. One might still think that a principle like the following is plausible:

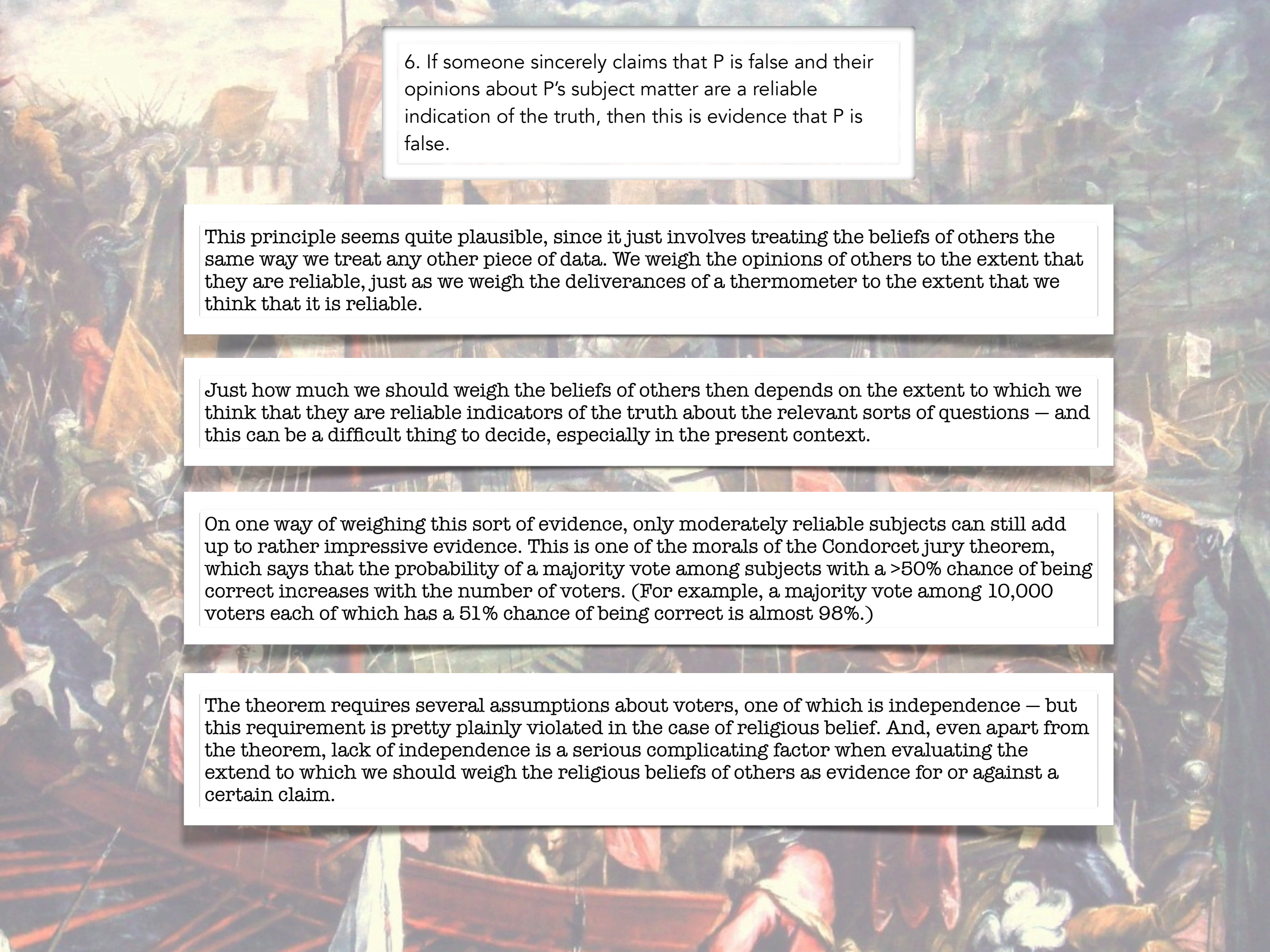
5. If someone (i) sincerely claims that P is false, (ii) has put as much thought into it as you have, (iii) has as much ability as you when it comes to questions about P's subject matter, and (iv) you possess no evidence or argument which would convince them to change their mind, then this is evidence that P is false.

But even this principle is not true — just imagine a case in which you have no reason to think that satisfaction of principles (i)-(iv) makes the person a reliable indicator of the truth of P. (Imagine someone forming a belief about whether the number of trees in Canada is even or odd.)

One might then modify this principle as follows:

6. If someone sincerely claims that P is false and their opinions about P's subject matter are a reliable indication of the truth, then this is evidence that P is false.





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This principle seems quite plausible, since it just involves treating the beliefs of others the same way we treat any other piece of data. We weigh the opinions of others to the extent that they are reliable, just as we weigh the deliverances of a thermometer to the extent that we think that it is reliable.

Just how much we should weigh the beliefs of others then depends on the extent to which we think that they are reliable indicators of the truth about the relevant sorts of questions – and this can be a difficult thing to decide, especially in the present context.

On one way of weighing this sort of evidence, only moderately reliable subjects can still add up to rather impressive evidence. This is one of the morals of the Condorcet jury theorem, which says that the probability of a majority vote among subjects with a  $>50\%$  chance of being correct increases with the number of voters. (For example, a majority vote among 10,000 voters each of which has a 51% chance of being correct is almost 98%.)

The theorem requires several assumptions about voters, one of which is independence – but this requirement is pretty plainly violated in the case of religious belief. And, even apart from the theorem, lack of independence is a serious complicating factor when evaluating the extent to which we should weigh the religious beliefs of others as evidence for or against a certain claim.