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God-Relationships With and Without God, by James Kellenberger. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989. Pp. xi and 174. \$39.95.

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With its purposively provocative title, this book offers a valuable analysis of the nature and varieties of human relationships with Divine Reality. Kellenberger argues (1) that meaningful (and ethical) religious praxis is a function of the *relationship* between the individual and Divine Reality and (2) that the same sort of fundamental relationship—an “abiding relationship”—is central to all religious traditions, whether they do or do not explicitly involve God. In the first part of the book, which draws heavily on Kierkegaard's views, Kellenberger provides a direct and clear account of God-relationships, focusing on their moral characteristics. The second part is more ambitious, though ultimately less successful, addressing religious pluralism in terms of God-relationships. Overall, the book is written with admirable clarity and a skillful use of literature, from Conrad's *Lord Jim* to Tolstoy to Gide, to explicate crucial aspects of relationships with Divine Reality.

The groundwork for understanding God-relationships is laid in the first part by analyzing the connection between God-relationships and religious morality. After explaining the notions of a guilt and a shame morality, Kellenberger suggests that a religious sin morality is unlike a shame morality because one attempts to live in accordance with one's God-relationship, not some personal ideal. Indeed, a religious sin morality is essentially a guilt morality, since violating the God-relationship is a sin. However, a religious sin morality also differs from ordinary guilt moralities insofar as one does not follow moral rules for the sake of a principle (or for self-interest), but is instead required to act—out of trust—for the sake of God. Thus, religious sin morality involves a faith relationship.

Faith involves beliefs about the “object” of faith. In contradistinction to a faith relationship, Kellenberger next develops the notion of an “abiding relationship.” He has in mind here such relationships as “walking humbly with God,” “seeking to do what is right,” “love of neighbor,” and even being a “devout skeptic” (pp. 84-89). Thus an abiding relationship is “a relationship to Divine Reality...[where] the individual may not become conscious of being related to Divine Reality...[and] which is not dependent on a belief in Divine Reality...” (p. 83). Kellenberger then employs this notion of an abiding relationship to address the pressing problem of religious pluralism, concluding that it provides a key, even if not the sole, solution. I will consider three difficulties with this latter part of Kellenberger's project.

Consider first Kellenberger's proposal that the “way of (abiding) relationships” serves as a solution to the problem of religious pluralism because it

“recognizes the cognitivity of religion, while allowing cognitivity to recede in importance” (p. 140). The value of this approach is that it avoids the parochial limitations of the exclusivist’s emphasis on tradition-specific doctrine. Indeed, in order to encompass the wide range of religious attitudes and practices, Kellenberger suggests that one might have an abiding relationship to Divine Reality in virtue of a commitment to justice for the oppressed, or the pursuit of world peace. But cast in such broad terms, how does this differ from secular humanism? And why call such relationships *God*-relationships—or even religious relationships? Despite Kellenberger’s interesting idea that, without explicit or implicit theistic cognitive content, one might have a “God-relationship without God,” it remains unconvincing that non-theistic abiding relationships, such as Brahman-relationships, can be properly referred to as “*God*-relationships” (and *vice versa*). In general, the more one insists that abiding relationships do not require (some) correct knowledge, or at least true beliefs, about Divine Reality, the less likely they are to be properly directed *to* Divine Reality, ensuing in correct religious praxis. Yet the more one allows that knowledge, or true belief, about the “object” of the relation is essential to all religious relations, the less successful is Kellenberger’s resolution of the conflicts among differing religious traditions: for then God-relationships appear to differ fundamentally from non-theistic relationships.

Kellenberger never entirely makes clear the ultimate significance of the cognitive in religion, and religious relationships. He is quite clear in developing the notion of a *faith* relationship to God that faith necessarily involves belief. But in preparation for his eventual solution to the problem of religious pluralism, Kellenberger argues that “given the logic of *belief in* or *faith in*...one can have a wrong conception of God and yet believe or have faith in Him” (p. 77). While there are important limits to how misguided one’s conception can be—for faith involves trust, implying that God must be personal—Kellenberger concludes that different religious traditions, despite even mutually incompatible beliefs about God, “yet believe in the same God.” This brings us to a second, related problem, regarding God-relationships.

It can of course turn out that two individuals with radically opposed beliefs about some entity are actually referring to, acting toward, holding beliefs about, etc. that entity. But believing in or having faith in the *same* God requires more than this. For right religious praxis, based on faith, requires a proper directedness toward the object of belief. One who believes God is malevolent and acts on that belief, and one who believes in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, do not have faith in the *same* God. Hence, we need a fuller explication of the extent to which theistic beliefs can be incompatible, and still be about God. And extending this point, we need to

know more about the degree to which beliefs in theistic and *non*-theistic traditions can be incompatible, and still count in a like sense as “abiding relationships.”

This brings us to a third and more significant problem with the notion of an “abiding relationship.” Kellenberger suggests that one has an abiding relationship with Divine Reality through commitment and practice, not in virtue of one’s particular beliefs or the nature of one’s faith. From this he concludes that persons with non-personal, as well as persons with personal, conceptions of the Divine—and even those with non-religious world-views like Marxism or secular humanism—can have *like* abiding relationships. If so, abiding relationships would provide a commonality, and perhaps even a sort of global glue, which resolves the apparent conflict among the world religions. Yet while the resultant acceptance of diverse religious viewpoints would be both desirable and important, this religious harmony is bought at considerable cost. For Kellenberger also insists that there must be a Divine Reality (or possibly *Realities*) to which individuals are related in abiding relationships. But this runs the danger of becoming a contentless notion, where “Divine Reality” is not to be understood as either theistic or non-theistic, much less specifically Christian or Advaita Vedantic. The *prima facie* advantage of the sort of resolution of the problem of religious pluralism which Kellenberger proposes is that the question of the correctness of the truth-claims of each tradition becomes “relatively unimportant” (p. 141). But as the examples Kellenberger himself uses to illustrate this show, the more the cognitive content of religion is set aside, the less clear it becomes whether the purported resolution is effected. For most fundamentally, it is unclear whether there can be abiding relationships which, as Kellenberger holds, are not at all a matter of belief.

One problem, to which Kellenberger is sensitive, is that non-theistic religious traditions, much as Zen Buddhism and Advaitist forms of Hinduism, do not seem to involve a *relationship* to Divine Reality. Kellenberger’s solution is (a) we do not need to determine if the Christian, say, and the Buddhist are in exactly the *same sort* of abiding relationship, and (b) for the non-theistic traditions, it is enlightenment or realization which functions as the key, religious relationship (p. 145). Regarding (a), the question is not whether there is some sort of relationship centrally operative in all world religions, but rather whether the operative relationships are the right sort to provide a significant likeness among them. This remains unsettled. More specifically, regarding (b), for Kellenberger “abiding with *God*” is paradigmatic and it is hard to see how “relating to the Eightfold Path in Theravada Buddhism” (Kellenberger’s example) is, in an illuminating way, *like* relating to a personal Deity. For instance, the ethical dimension of a faith relationship to God which Kellenberger explicates does not seem applicable to one’s “relationship” to

a non-personal "way." Kellenberger does suggest that whether the Christian and Buddhist are in the same abiding relationship (love of neighbor and God, and compassion for the world, respectively) would be determined by the sameness of practice (love or compassion). Even so, we are still left wondering precisely which features of their respective practices we are to look at to see if the Theravada Buddhist and the Christian are alike in their respective religious relationships. Again, Kellenberger's account of abiding relationships lacks sufficient content to provide a resolution.

To illustrate his view of abiding relationships, Kellenberger suggests two analogies (p. 82 & 141). Just as one may walk with another without knowing the other, or even that the other is there, so too, Kellenberger suggests, one can walk with God in an abiding relationship without knowing God. However, while one might perform the act of walking next to someone without knowing it, this does not parallel the sense in which the theist says that someone "truly" walks with God. Put in Kellenberger's terms, if God exists, then in a sense all creatures "walk with God," but not all have a (personal) relationship with God. As Kellenberger acknowledges, one must consider an individual's background beliefs to understand his or her actions. Thus, one's beliefs differentiate standing around idly from surreptitiously watching others under the guise of a languid pose. Just so, the difference between walking along with God and truly walking with God, between co-existing with God and relating to God, is, in part, a matter of one's beliefs: e.g., Christian beliefs which conflict with Buddhist, and Hindu, and Moslem beliefs. Since beliefs are a determining factor of religious praxis, the conflict between the world religions remains. Again, Kellenberger suggests that every monogamous man can say "my wife is the best wife in the world" without mutual contradiction if thereby understood as proclaiming their "right individual relationships to their wives." Likewise, suggests Kellenberger, adherents of the great world religions can be in similar abiding relationships, even though their beliefs conflict (p. 141). But this does not dissolve the literal contradiction among the truth-claims of the married, or the truth-claims of the world religions—it is just to set aside the cognitive content of those claims.

In sum, Kellenberger comes up against the same problem which confronts other pluralist solutions (like that of John Hick, whose work Kellenberger draws upon) to the conflicting truth-claims of the world religions. Either the specificity of the claims of each world religion is taken seriously—and then the truth-claims certainly appear to conflict—or the claims are set aside, or reduced in relevance—and then there is no real harmony because there is little substantive, cognitively significant content in the world religions to harmonize. Kellenberger's attempt to resolve this problem is original and ambitious. But within his particular account, either the world religions may be viewed as being in close accord, but at the cost of diluting the notion of

an “abiding relationship,” or God-relationships do not really apply to non-theistic relationships, and the problem of apparent contradiction among the world religions remains unresolved. Even so, Kellenberger helps us see the seminal importance of abiding relationships. And his development of the notion of an abiding relationship is illuminating in itself, especially when applied individually to Christianity, or other world religions.