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Griffiths, AN APOLOGY FOR APOLOGETICS

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volitionist line: see such people as misdescribing their own experience or see their "conversion" as somehow substandard. Either alternative might give one pause; however, one can hypothesize about Kierkegaardian reasons for such a claim. For example, one could doubt that 'will power' is ever enough to engage decisively one's being, arguing that weighing and making a deliberate choice among equally real options would at best bring one to Christendom, not to Christianity. Or, one might apply Ferreira's very interesting suggestions about the role of the understanding and critical appraisal in Kierkegaardian faith (pp. 129-144) by arguing that volitionist conversion would be irrational in ways that Kierkegaardian conversion would not. A filling out and evaluation of such lines of argument would be a worthwhile extension of Ferreira's project.

An alternative would be to take the volitionist and the Kierkegaardian to be describing two different, but equally valid, modes of conversion (a position one might call weak Kierkegaardianism or weak volitionism, depending on one's initial loyalties). After all, God's house has many mansions and the Spirit "blows where it wills." Perhaps there are leaps and leaps. It may be that many more conversions are like Dillard's breathtaking description of Hugh's plunge into a Puget Sound pond than like the more prosaic decision to jump from the side of a well-illumined swimming pool; we would have to, as Wittgenstein so often recommends, *look and see*. But, within the Christian tradition, we should also humbly keep in mind that we see ourselves as well as others "through a glass darkly."

NOTE

1. Annie Dillard, *The Living* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), p. 397.

An Apology for Apologetics, by **Paul J. Griffiths**. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991. Pp. xii and 113. $16.95 (paper).

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This is a polemical book, written to challenge conventional academic wisdom on the value of religious apologetics. Griffiths would like the university to remain open to those who would, as scholars, advocate the truth of a particular tradition. His proposal is striking, to put it mildly. Religious advocacy and scholarly objectivity have not commonly been thought compatible. In the Western academy, a murky religious pluralism has been the order of the day. Departments of religion encourage the comparative study of religion, as long as that remains a descriptive task, but they generally discourage comparative evaluation. In part this is because individual religious traditions are demanding objects of study, and very few of us are in a position to make substantive

evaluations across traditions. The need for circumspection in the face of religious complexity raises no objection to evaluation in principle, however, and I suspect that Griffiths, who is well acquainted with the intricacies of Theravada Buddhism, would be the last to claim that evaluation across traditions is an easy task. The more controversial motive of comparative religious study has been the assumption, sometimes implicit but often explicit, that all religious traditions are equally worthy of study because no one religion is any closer to the truth than another. To suppose otherwise is to operate under some fundamental misconception about religion or truth or both. In defending apologetics, Griffiths hopes to put religious pluralism on a footing that is supportive of normative inquiry.

Rhetorically Griffiths presents himself as an advocate of the traditional discipline of apologetics, or the philosophical art of religious advocacy. Apologetics can be pursued modestly, as when it is limited to a critique of criticisms (negative apologetics), or more ambitiously, as when it becomes a defense of a tradition's cognitive superiority over its competitors (positive apologetics). The practice of negative apologetics has enjoyed a renewed respectability in the wake of "Reformed epistemology," but positive apologetics is still considered bad manners (or worse) in our era of increasing sensitivity to religious and cultural diversity. Griffiths intends to rehabilitate positive apologetics, not as a form of systematic philosophical inquiry into religious truth, but as a legitimate ad hoc response to disagreement in interreligious dialogue. His means to this end is to elaborate and defend what he refers to as "the principle of the necessity of interreligious apologetics" or the NOIA principle for short. It reads as follows (p. 3):

> If representative intellectuals belonging to some specific religious community come to judge at a particular time that some or all of their own doctrine-expressing sentences are incompatible with some alien religious claim(s), then they should feel obliged to engage in both positive and negative apologetics vis-à-vis these alien religious claim(s) and their promulgators.

Put a little less formally, if you are a participant in the intellectual life of your religious community, and you discover that another community's way of looking at the world differs significantly from your own, sometimes your most intellectually respectable course of action is to make the case that they are wrong and that you and your community are right.

Griffiths hopes his NOIA principle will find favor with his intended audience of literate nonspecialists, folks who are concerned with what implications diversity of belief might have for the rationality of religious commitment but who aren't likely to be familiar with what theologians, social scientists, and philosophers have made of religious pluralism. The specialists have shaped the orthodox consensus Griffiths contends against, and he describes it for his readers by setting out hypothetical strategies (he calls them

"abstract possibilities"), which more or less comprise the methods scholars have used to explain away the appearance of interreligious disagreement. Conceptual relativists interpret truth as truth-relative-to-a-scheme, and consequently they deny that criteria of assessment ever carry across cultural and religious divides. That leaves different faiths conceptually quarantined, with no one faith being able to affect (or infect) the way another understands the world. Experiential expressivists suppose that different religious conceptual schemes all have their impetus in a common religious experience. The experience bridges cultures, but description of the experience does not. Religious pluralism is therefore inevitable, but conflict at the level of doctrines will always be verbal, never substantive, for all doctrines have the same referent. Rule theorists take different religious conceptual schemes to prescribe and facilitate different forms of religious practice and experience. Whereas the expressivist takes doctrine to express experience, the rule theorist takes doctrine to regulate it. Rule theorists expect different doctrines to constitute substantially different forms of life, and so like conceptual relativists, they restrict truth to a scheme, only they put their emphasis on schemes of practice rather than on schemes of understanding. Griffiths adds perspectivists to these other strategists, but as far as I can tell perspectivists are conceptual relativists who believe that all the religious schemes taken together somehow manage to represent the truth. But, of course, since different schemes are incommensurable, partial truth is the best anyone can hope to comprehend.

I dare say that most of us would in our theoretical innocence tend to assume that interreligious disagreement is sometimes precisely what it seems to be—genuine disagreement. There is a certain empirical implausibility to the different theories of religion that Griffiths surveys, at least insofar as each makes too little of disagreement, but he chooses to critique them less as descriptions of religion than as normative ideals. This is a shrewd move. If there is an academic consensus against taking the measure of one religion against another (and I think that there is), it is a consensus influenced as much as by the history of apologetics as by scholarly interest in accurate description. The historical legacy of apologetics has left most scholars of religion convinced that the partiality of apologetics undermines the serious investigation of religious diversity. Their conviction is not hard to understand. Those who have ranked religions have not historically been those who have cared much about the vitality, integrity, and inherent interest of the "inferior" religions and their host cultures. Christian apologists in particular have suffered in reputation from the company they have kept. It is hard now to hear talk of Christian superiority without also hearing an echo of Western triumphalism. If scholars of religion avoid evaluative language, that is at least in part because doing without it dampens the impulse to devalue another culture's religious life relative to one's own. Neutrality comes to take the place of advocacy, and in the eyes of the neutral observer, all religions are created equal.

Griffiths is no enemy of religious pluralism, being himself a philosopher of *religions*, but he disputes the consensus under which pluralism is embraced. His colleagues, he contends, have treated a contingent connection between a willingness to argue and a will to dominate as if it were a logical one. It doesn't follow from the fact that positive apologetics has sometimes served the cause of oppression that it must always do so. Griffiths is surely right, but so what? Let's just admit that the academic consensus against the propriety of comparative religious evaluation has been formed in the hope of broadening the scope of religious inquiry and of facilitating interreligious understanding at a particular historical juncture. No one needs to claim that comparative evaluations are always useless given the nature of religion or truth, but only that they haven't been very useful given the course of history, and that at present we have little reason to believe they will be more useful in the future. If interreligious understanding can advance without recourse to positive apologetics, then the contingent association between positive apologetics and religious intolerance is damning enough.

But Griffiths would balk at so blithe an avoidance of apologetics. The NOIA principle he defends is a hypothetical imperative, and when its antecedent conditions are fulfilled, negative and positive apologetics are prescribed, not merely permitted. I don't want to quibble over whether the antecedent conditions are ever fulfilled. It seems to me that they often are. The more vexing question concerns the force of the imperative. Why should we ever under any circumstances feel obliged to do what NOIA prescribes?

Griffiths commends us to our sense of intellectual obligation or epistemic duty, but either I have no epistemic conscience at all, or what he appeals to doesn't amount to much. If I want to uphold the cognitive superiority of my community's religious teachings, then I generally have to assume two kinds of argumentative burden. I must endeavor to undermine the beliefs of my community's competitors, and I must endeavor to secure the plausibility of my own community's point of view. I cannot fathom at all how I could be epistemically obliged to attempt the first task, and as far as the second task goes, Griffith would have me secure this plausibility without having to appeal to any assumptions my competitors would not accept. That's good advice if I want to try to win them over to my side, but why am I obliged to try to win them over? To save their souls? In a university community that would make me about as welcome as a snake-oil salesman. Saving souls is not, moreover, an epistemic duty. If I do have some sort of epistemic duty to win them over, then, Griffith suggests, it will be derived from the basic axiom, "Every human being is placed under the epistemic obligation to avoid knowing assent to false propositions" (p. 68). That is going to be some derivation. The axiom itself doesn't even make sense, except as an injunction not to lie.

I admit that I am skeptical of the very idea of an epistemic obligation, and

if Griffiths fails to clarify this idea (as I believe he does), his singular contribution to our understanding of religious pluralism and its implications stands nevertheless. I doubt whether the academic study of religion could have freed itself from parochialism without first having had the benefit of the "orthodoxy" Griffiths seeks to dismantle. Still, one has to wonder with Griffiths whether methodological guarantees of a community's religious integrity continue to serve the cause of religious inquiry. Students of religion are overly enamored of what Davidson referred to as the third dogma of empiricism, or the dualism of conceptual scheme and empirical content. Giving up the dogma won't secure the case for positive apologetics, but it will weaken the distinction between interpretation and evaluation. In his advocacy of apologetics, Griffiths is taking us beyond the third dogma and therefore beyond the choice between vacuous interreligious agreement (content without scheme) and insulated intrareligious positing (scheme without content). What he leaves us with is not, however, traditional apologetics, as he sometimes suggests, but a new paradigm of religious inquiry. The aim of a new apologetics is not to convert, or to disabuse, but to advance a common hope for wisdom. We have been involved in a larger and more substantive conversation than our methodologies have led us to imagine.