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BOOK REVIEWS

Problems of Religious Diversity by Paul Griffiths Blackwell, 2001 xvi + 176.
Paper \$26.95

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This engaging and clearly written book deals with these important topics: attitudes to the truth of the claims of religious traditions other than one's own; whether one's degree of epistemic confidence in the claims of one's own tradition should be diminished in virtue of acquaintance with other traditions; what attitude one should have to members of other traditions; and what attitude one should have to their salvific prospects. In each of these areas Griffiths outlines alternatives, making useful and sometimes original distinctions and moves.

Griffiths emphasizes the differences between how things look to the nonreligious, on the one hand, and to the religiously committed, on the other, displaying in the process a pleasing sense of the complexity of actual traditions and of the variety of resources they have at their disposal. He also makes some recommendations, indicating what he thinks should be the responses of his own tradition, Roman Catholic Christianity, and sometimes of Christianity as a whole. Briefly, these are as follows.

Truth. He says that "for Christians (and not just Catholic Christians) ... open inclusivism ... [is] the correct [and best] position." (64) Open inclusivism of the sort that he advocates is the view that one's own religion teaches more truths, or teaches them more fully, than does any other religion, but that it is possible that another tradition makes true claims that are not yet explicitly recognized by one's own tradition. In explaining why he thinks that, for Catholics, in particular, open inclusivism is the best option, he says that "the Church has not yet given explicit formulation to all the religiously significant truths implied by the revelation she preserves and transmits ... [and] may be prompted to formulate and teach what it has not previously formulated and taught by coming to know of truths discovered and taught by those outside its boundaries" (62-3). So what we have here extends only to an openness to learning from others truths that are already "implicit" in the deposit of faith received by the Church. Indeed, he says that it is merely *possible* that others possess such truths. He does not say that they do so. Nor does he provide an example of anything that his tradition has actually learned from another religious tradition.



Epistemic confidence (or confidence that one's beliefs amount to knowledge). Griffiths' view is that whether Christians should significantly reduce epistemic confidence in Christian doctrine in response to the fact that there are others who disagree depends on whether they can explain (or rather explain away) this fact. His own judgment is that "Christians ought to be moderately epistemically troubled by knowledge of deep religious diversity" (96). Also "the epistemic uneasiness often (and properly) produced by increasing Christian awareness of deep diversity should be acknowledged as a neuralgic point of creative conceptual growth for Christian thought, of the same order of importance, perhaps, as is attention to the question of apparently unmerited suffering." (97)

Attitudes to others Here Griffiths distinguishes three responses: tolerance of others, separation of one's own group from other groups, and evangelism. And he opts for evangelism, drawing on Pope John Paul II's encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio*, according to which "the missionary thrust ... belongs to the very nature of the Christian life" (132).

Salvation. Griffiths' opinion is that "the grammar and syntax of orthodox Christian thought strongly suggests that some version of exclusivism (about salvation) must be affirmed; and that restrictivism (at least in its more extreme versions) must simultaneously be denied." (161) What this amounts to is that belonging to Christianity is necessary for salvation but there is no basis for saying that there is anyone who will not be saved. This is partly because someone who refuses God's offer of salvation in this life might not do so eternally. It is also because Griffiths favors a relaxed reading of "belonging to Christianity" that does not require explicit, observable, card-carrying participation and that indeed leaves open the possibility that members of other traditions belong to Christianity and hence may meet this requirement for salvation.

These are rather conservative responses. (However, there are nuances that need to be noted. As we have seen, open inclusivism about truth does not extend to learning anything new and hence is rather closed; on the other hand, Griffiths' exclusivism about salvation is rather inclusive.) Griffith's general conservatism is also manifested as follows. He says that the claim "God loves me", like the claim "my wife exists", is "entirely insulated from argument, which is roughly to say that I would reject any argument whose conclusion was that either of these claims is false solely on the ground that it had such a conclusion." (47) Such claims are, for him, immune to evidence or argument, or non-negotiable. Presumably he does not merely report here on an interesting fact about himself. He thinks that he is not going wrong in any way in this regard. He is neither irrational nor in any other undesirable state in virtue of taking this position.

The question immediately arises: Does Griffiths think that counterparts to these responses in the four key areas are appropriate in the case of other, or some other, traditions? Should Methodists, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Bah'ai, and so forth, respond in such ways as these when they encounter other groups and their views – including, of course, the Catholic Christian views espoused by Griffiths? Is this one size that fits all?

His answer has two parts. On the one hand he endorses some general principles that bear on how all, or at least many, traditions should respond

to the fact of religious diversity. But he also thinks that it is in virtue of various internal resources that it has at its disposal that the Catholic tradition should respond as he thinks it should. And he thinks that other traditions should, in turn, be guided by *their* internal resources. He takes the ways in which people do respond as a guide to how they should respond.

The general principles are, I think, to be filtered through the internal resources of each tradition, thereby yielding religion-specific guidelines.

Consider his conclusions concerning epistemic confidence. He asks this question, which certainly is stated in a sufficiently general way that it bears on all religious traditions: "Does (or should) coming to know of religious diversity reduce or remove religious people's epistemic confidence in the religious assertions they find themselves making?" (17) (I will just pass over the fact that the normative part of this line of enquiry sits uneasily with his view that we are unable to exercise voluntary control over our assents.)

Griffiths begins his answer to this question by introducing the following general principle (72f.). The extent to which the epistemic confidence with which you hold a belief should be diminished when you encounter disagreement should be determined by the following:

your initial degree of confidence in the belief;
the apparent trustworthiness and authoritativeness of those who disagree;
and the extent to which the disagreement of others can be accounted for.

Next we need to turn to what a particular tradition actually says about these matters. ("There is no single and unavoidable answer to the question of how inhabitants of a religious form of life ought to respond, epistemically speaking, to their coming to know of irreducible diversity in religious assent" (75; also 97).

First, in Griffiths' view, religious beliefs are, by definition, held with great confidence.

Second, Griffiths says initially that the perceived trustworthiness and authoritativeness of others will be a function of the extent to which they are morally admirable. And his reasonable and generous assessment is that there are many people in other religious traditions who are very admirable in this regard. Hence they, and their teachings, should be taken seriously (78). However, if one's tradition does *not* teach that good moral citizenship makes for religious insight, one will not be in the least troubled by the fact that morally admirable outsiders hold beliefs that are incompatible with the home beliefs (79). Since most traditions do not consider outsiders, however morally admirable, to be trustworthy and authoritative on religious matters, the significance of the fact of disagreement is accordingly diminished.

Third, numerous religious traditions have ways of accounting for how it is that others disagree – ways that seem plausible to insiders. Thus outsiders are said to be sinful, or not to have received the requisite revelation, or to have misunderstood or rejected that revelation, or to be ignorant, or

self-deceived, and so on. The variety of finger-pointing maneuvers is familiar to all of us.

So when the general principle concerning epistemic confidence is combined with the resources of any of the religious traditions, it seems that the fact of religious disagreement will provide people in any of those traditions with little reason to diminish the confidence with which they hold their beliefs. Broadly speaking, the presence of a variety of traditions should, according to Griffiths, not make much difference to a particular tradition *unless that tradition says that it should do so*.

Moreover, some traditions dismiss other traditions as, for example, the work of the devil. If we simply consider what they ought to do to be a matter of what they actually do, then of course traditions that do respond in such ways are right to do so.

As we have seen, Griffiths says that “Christians ought to be moderately epistemically troubled by knowledge of deep religious diversity” and that this knowledge should be a “neuralgic point of creative conceptual growth”. However, the exact way in which the general principle discussed above combined with the relevant resources of the Christian tradition yield this outcome (rather than, say, the result that Christians ought not to be epistemically troubled at all by knowledge of deep religious diversity) is not explained. Furthermore, what do being moderately epistemically troubled and being an occasion for conceptual growth amount to? For example, can you be troubled in the relevant sense about a belief and yet hold it in the non-negotiable way mentioned above?

A few final points:

1. The attitudes to outsiders considered here are tolerance, separation and evangelism. Absent from this list is, for example, the possibility of a respectful, exploratory, curious and courteous eagerness to understand others and their views. This lacuna is striking given Griffiths’ own efforts and approach, both in other academic work and in his professional life, which often seems to display just such a commendable and generous attitude to other traditions. [Approved/offered by author]

2. If it is right for Griffiths’ tradition to evangelize, then presumably it also is right for others to do so, assuming that their tradition has internal resources that tell them that they should do so. Is this mutual religious head-butting really the best we can do?

3. In what sense were the modern evolutionary and cosmological discoveries that the Catholic tradition has embraced already present in the tradition? (These are the only cases mentioned in which Griffiths’ tradition has learned anything from without the tradition.) Surely these are better understood as cases in which a tradition has learned something genuinely new.

4. Griffiths says that “[religion] is understood in this book in phenomenal terms, which is to say in terms of how forms of life of a certain sort seem to those who inhabit them” (43). But perhaps examining how things look from within existing believing communities is not the most reliable guide to how to respond to an external challenge whose force has not previously been appreciated by those communities. Griffiths provides a report on business as usual but perhaps diversity is the sort of problem

that calls for a change in business as usual. At least the possibility should be considered that, say, sincere Muslims should rethink their beliefs in light of the available alternatives – irrespective of what their tradition may antecedently have had to say about this. The question of what changes people might need to make is at least as interesting as the question of what answer they are currently disposed to provide. The conservative approach advocated here seems to me to exclude from consideration a realistic appraisal of the significance of religious diversity.

5. Why is it that “[religious] diversity raises some questions about the epistemic confidence with which religious people do and should treat the assents they understand to be required of them by belonging to their religion”(66)? There is a problem of religious diversity only if you think that other traditions count for something, have something to offer, are admirable, might be learned from, are worth taking seriously, and so forth. If you think that none of this is so, there is no problem. Griffiths takes the issue of diversity seriously enough to write a book about it. Yet his response, in large part, is to say: here are the facts of religious diversity; and here is the response of my tradition to those facts. End of discussion. But this should be the beginning of discussion.

I enjoyed reading Griffiths’ book. It is a valuable contribution to discussion of its topic and there certainly is much to be learned from it. Yet my judgment is that it does not respond adequately to the problems with which it is wrestling.

Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity, by Robert McKim. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. Pp. xi, 280. \$47.50.

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Robert McKim’s book is predicated upon the assumption that “the world is religiously ambiguous;” “it is possible to interpret the world in a variety of religious ways, and to interpret it naturalistically,” and “to do so without any loss of rationality” (21).

One consequence of this ambiguity is the divine hiddenness. Part I explores its nature and implications. After offering reasons for thinking that God’s hiddenness is pervasive, McKim divides theological explanations of it into three types: appeals to human defectiveness, to divine transcendence, and (most important) to the advantages of hiddenness. The following chapters explore these alleged “benefits of mystery”—that “God must be hidden if we are to be able to make morally significant choices” (26), that divine hiddenness is a necessary condition of our freedom to believe or not believe, that it is a presupposition of trust, worship, and the like—and assesses the claim that, if God exists, it is reasonable to suppose that there are goods of mystery that are unknown to us. McKim’s conclusion is that (1) while these proposals have their problems, at least some of them may contribute to an explanation of God’s hiddenness and that (2) “although the mystery that surrounds the nature and existence of God is a