

Religious Diversity and the Closed Mind*

Kevin Schilbrack / Wesleyan College

In recent philosophical work on the issue of religious diversity, one of the central questions has been whether the reality of religious diversity constitutes a reason to question one's religious beliefs. To be sure, simply the fact that someone disagrees with me, or someone's group disagrees with my group, does not necessarily oblige me to lose confidence in my convictions. But say that I am on one side of a question and my opponents, it turns out, are people who seem to be both intellectually and morally my equals. All three books under review refer to this situation. As Robert McKim says, "It is not just the fact that there are diverse beliefs that is striking; it is the fact that wise people who think carefully and judiciously, who are intelligent, clever, honest, reflective, and serious, who avoid distortion, exaggeration, and confabulation, who admit ignorance when appropriate, and who have relied on what has seemed to them to be the relevant considerations in the course of acquiring their beliefs, hold these diverse beliefs" (p. 129). David Basinger call this "religious epistemic peer conflict," that is, "epistemic conflicts between individuals who seem to be equally knowledgeable and sincere" (p. 1). Paul Griffiths describes the loss of confidence people often feel "when those holding and advocating incompatible beliefs seem authoritative and trustworthy" (p. 73). In such a situation, then, should I be led to question myself?

Many say no. They make claims like "the simple disagreement of one's intellectual peers is not detrimental to one's belief" or "in a context of religious disagreement, the only rational course is to sit tight in the religious practice one already has." Sometimes they give theological reasons, for example, by claiming that "it would be a serious violation of one's relation with God to consider for a moment that some other religion might be true." But often their lack of concern about religious diversity is put forward as a natural response: "If the wheel does not squeak, don't oil it." This indifference is held by thinkers who typically describe them-

* Robert McKim, *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Paul J. Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001); and David Basinger, *Religious Diversity: A Philosophical Assessment* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2002).

© 2003 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved.

0022-4189/2003/8301-0006/\$10.00

selves as exclusivists, in that they hold that their own religion is uniquely true and other religions are false. But this satisfied indifference or closed mindedness is not necessarily a part of exclusivism. If an exclusivist also holds, for theological or philosophical reasons, that the divine makes itself available to all of creation or that a person is always fallible, one could be an exclusivist and still recognize the value or even the obligation to test one's beliefs in the light of disagreement with the views of one's peers. But these exclusivists add a certain (extremely high) level of confidence—even saying things like the fact that they were born into the true religion is “no accident.” Consequently they insist that they are under no epistemic obligation to question their religious beliefs. Put another way, the only task of exclusivism they recognize is to defend the right to their exclusivism. Following Jerome Gellman, let us call them “contented religious exclusivists.”¹

Griffiths provides an analysis of epistemic confidence that helps to illuminate the appeal of this position. On his account, there are three factors that shape the believer's sense of certainty. One will be more likely to be (and should be) troubled by religious diversity to the extent that (i) one's initial confidence in one's beliefs is weak, (ii) one's opponents seem authoritative and trustworthy, and (iii) one cannot explain why one's opponents have come to hold what seem like wrong beliefs. Conversely, one will be less likely to be (and should not be) troubled by religious diversity to the extent that (i) one's initial confidence in one's beliefs is strong, (ii) one's opponents do not seem authoritative or trustworthy, and (iii) one has an explanation why one's opponents disagree, for example, because they are attached to egoistic desires or are blinded by sin. The opponents of exclusivism have often pointed to the apparent moral and intellectual integrity of the members of other religions (which is to say, they have focused on the second and third factors), but Griffiths points out that the most important factor is really the first. This is because it is characteristic of religious beliefs to be woven so deeply into the believers' fabric of beliefs and into their lives that these beliefs come to seem nonnegotiable and unquestionable (pp. 76–78). Thus it is often as difficult for religious believers to question whether God is real and loves them as it is for them to question whether their parents are real and love them. Since everyone has some beliefs like this—beliefs that one cannot imagine living without and that are of central importance in how one orders one's life—it makes sense that some would come to the conclusion that they can contentedly ignore those who disagree with such beliefs. Griffiths himself would clearly like to see religious disagreement give rise to the idea that mem-

¹ Jerome Gellman, “In Defense of Contented Religious Exclusivism,” *Religious Studies* 36, no. 4 (December 2000): 401–17.

bers of one religion may be able to learn from the members of other religions. As he says, "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" (p. 97). But given the above analysis Griffiths does not seem to believe that one can give a principle or rule that will apply to all religious believers a priori, that is, independent of looking into the particularities of their conceptual resources for understanding disagreement.

It is just such a requirement that the other two books under review try to develop. Robert McKim argues that when a disagreement about an issue is between people of integrity (as described in my first paragraph), the disagreement provides a reason for each side to take what he calls the "Critical Stance" toward their own beliefs. The Critical Stance involves two principles: that one examine one's beliefs about that issue and that one hold one's beliefs about that issue tentatively. To examine one's beliefs is to attempt to assess the evidence for and against one's beliefs and for and against competing beliefs; it is to reject the idea that being religious means believing unquestioningly. To hold one's beliefs tentatively is to recognize that one's beliefs may be mistaken and may need revision; it is to take an attitude to one's religious beliefs that is humble and open to change. Quoting Peter Berger, McKim wants to emphasize "an 'open-endedness' that 'frustrates the deep religious hunger for certainty,' one that substitutes 'hypothesis for proclamation'" (p. 145). "Religion in accordance with the Critical Stance is religion that is conducted more in the mode of longing and aspiration than in the mode of confident declaration" (p. 142).

There is so much self-righteousness in people, including religious philosophers, that McKim's endorsement of the Critical Stance is healthy and laudable. He is right that it would lead to greater tolerance and respect for others. And he is also right that being a practicing member of a particular faith and assuming the Critical Stance are not incompatible: there is nothing about being religious that requires closed mindedness. Nevertheless, though disagreement with people of integrity provides one with a reason to take the Critical Stance toward one's religious beliefs, it does not oblige one to do so.

One weakness is that McKim contrasts the tentative belief that he recommends with decisive assent that terminates the process of inquiring into the truth of one's belief. To believe decisively that something is the case is to be convinced that it is the case. It does not follow that one is unconditionally committed to that belief; decisive assent is still fallible. But it does mean that one considers the belief established to the extent

that one is allowed to end the search for reasons for and against believing it (p. 155). So the question at hand is whether decisive assent is inappropriate when there is disagreement, and so whether decisive religious belief is inappropriate given a context of religious diversity. In answering this question, it is helpful, I believe, to consider examples of beliefs that are central to one's life in the way that Griffiths describes. Almost all such beliefs (whether religious or moral or political) are held by communities and traditions in disagreement. And some of these people are not only those whom McKim would describe as people of "integrity" in his sense that they are intelligent, clever, honest, reflective, serious, and so on, but also those he would call "experts"—those who have reflected on the relevant issues and have worked out a view "with some care" and who have attempted to understand the point of view of those who disagree (pp. 134–35). Does it follow that one should hold all such beliefs tentatively? And for how long? Though one may be able to live in a state of such indecisiveness, it can hardly be an epistemic obligation. Instead, one's set of beliefs will typically and properly be stratified into the less-than-central beliefs one holds tentatively and those central beliefs one holds decisively. McKim is probably right that people should hold more of their beliefs in a tentative way than they presently do, but it does not follow that they should do this for all the beliefs on which they stake their lives.²

McKim's principle that one examine one's beliefs (he calls it the E-principle) faces a related problem. McKim leaves open the question of whether one must examine one's beliefs only once to satisfy this requirement, or whether one must repeatedly reexamine one's beliefs as long as there is disagreement (p. 195). But it seems that neither answer reaches the goal that McKim seeks. Granted, examining one's beliefs may lead to the disagreement being overcome. It may lead one to see that one has assented to one's beliefs unjustifiably. Or it may lead one to see that one's opponents have integrity, are concerned with finding the truth, have been serious and careful and honest about what they believe and are not morally inferior, and so it may make it more difficult to dismiss them and their views. But in many or most cases, examination will not overcome the disagreement. If the E-principle requires one to examine and reexamine one's beliefs until the disagreement is overcome, then there is no closure or end to the principle's requirements, and one is returned to the state of a perpetual self-examination and the thoroughgoing tentativeness to which I have objected. But if the principle requires one to

² Perhaps McKim would be open to a revision of his proposal in which the Critical Stance permits both tentative assent and decisive assent as forms of fallible belief, and both are distinguished from holding a belief absolutely, i.e., so that it is immune from being called into question. I owe this suggestion to Franklin Gamwell.

examine one's beliefs only once and not constantly to reexamine them, and so it applies only to those unquestioning believers who have never examined their beliefs, then none of McKim's philosophical opponents has failed this requirement. In fact, the contented religious exclusivists who have already examined their belief that they need not hold their beliefs tentatively will already have satisfied the E-principle.

Basinger takes up this line of thought. Like McKim and Griffiths, Basinger would like to see contented religious exclusivists assess their beliefs in light of conflict with their epistemic peers. And like McKim but unlike Griffiths, he believes that we can identify a general principle that identifies one's rational obligations in such circumstances. He proposes what he calls "Basinger's Rule," which states that "if a religious exclusivist wants to maximize truth and avoid error, she is under a *prima facie* obligation to attempt to resolve significant epistemic peer conflict" (p. 11).³ Basinger emphasizes that his Rule is conditional: if one does not want to disturb one's contentment with one's religion by questioning one's beliefs, one does not violate any requirement of rationality. Basinger's Rule still obliges, however, for two reasons. First, he argues, "choosing not to assess a belief that is the subject of epistemic peer conflict is choosing not to maximize truth and maximizing truth is a basic epistemic duty . . . [and] a person who consciously violates an epistemic duty forfeits justified belief" (p. 13). Second, Basinger also argues—commonsensically—that one cannot legitimately claim that one's religion is superior, as exclusivists do by definition, and refuse to submit the conflicting beliefs to assessment. Thus "the religious exclusivist who, in the face of epistemic peer conflict, fails to meet this obligation—fails to submit the belief(s) in question to belief assessment—is no longer justified in claiming that her perspective is superior" (p. 12). In other words, those who make a comparative claim must actually compare.

Basinger's presentation of his rule has at least two advantages over McKim's principles. First, it does not "frustrate the religious hunger for certainty" by requiring believers to conduct their religion in the tentative mode. As Basinger says, we can assess beliefs in which we have not lost confidence (p. 25). This means, I take it, that religious believers will hold some of their beliefs decisively, but when epistemic peer conflict leads them to assess these beliefs, they can shift them to the tentative mode in which they open the process of inquiry into that belief. Believers can then

³ Basinger does not discuss that maximizing truth and avoiding error are, as William James pointed out, independent desiderata that suggest different doxastic strategies. To maximize truth one should believe as much as possible; to avoid error one should believe as little as possible. Basinger often collapses the two goals into the first, so perhaps he means that one should seek to maximize truth while avoiding error. I owe this observation to Matthew Bagger.

resolve the conflict by identifying and assessing the evidence (or at least the reasons) why they and their epistemic competitors hold the beliefs they do. If one concludes that one's beliefs are justified, one can legitimately return those beliefs to their decisive status and let them maintain their central place in one's web of beliefs, even if one's peers disagree.

A second value of Basinger's approach is that he applies his Rule not only to religious diversity between religions but also to religious disagreement within a single religion, what Basinger calls "intersystem disagreement."⁴ Basinger is persuasive that the questions that apply to intersystem diversity (e.g., between Christians about God's power or foreknowledge) apply in exactly the same sense to intrasystem diversity. And Basinger uses this strategy to powerful effect. As Basinger points out, even if exclusivists do not care if they disagree with peers of other religions, "acknowledged intra-system peer conflict almost always challenges a theist's confidence" (p. 25). In other words, though contented religious exclusivists argue that one does not have an obligation to question oneself when one disagrees with those of other faiths, this position comes off as blinkered and groundless when applied to disagreements within one's home religion.

Most of the debate has focused on what I have focused on in this article. But there are two more considerations, both of which represent deep difficulties for contented religious exclusivism. One is raised by Griffiths, the other by attention to history, and both point toward questions that philosophers thinking about religious diversity should turn to.

Griffiths's argument is as simple as it is powerful. He observes that exclusivism, properly defined as the view that one's religion is exclusively or uniquely true and other religions are false,⁵ "commits anyone who holds it to the claim that no alien religious teaching is identical with any teaching of the home community. For if there were any such instance of identity, it would immediately follow that if the relevant teaching of the home community is true, that of the alien religion must also be" (p. 54). But there are many such instances of identity. Griffiths gives examples such as "unrestricted violence is unacceptable" and "sensual indulgence is not the highest human good," and many more could easily be found. Given this doctrinal overlap, "exclusivism is not a serious response to the question of religious truth raised by religious diversity" (p. 56). In fact, as Griffiths notes, although it is popular among philosophers of religion, exclusivism is not taught by actual religious communities: "There are, I

⁴ Irritatingly, Basinger calls all religions "theistic systems," which seems about as appropriate as calling all scriptures "Bibles."

⁵ An unhelpful (but not uncommon) definition of exclusivism treats it as the view that one's own religious beliefs are true and that beliefs incompatible with one's own are false. As Basinger notes, however, this view does not define exclusivism but is shared by all the positions on religious diversity, including Hick's pluralism (pp. 4–5).

think, no instances of its being propounded as doctrine by any Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, or Taoist community" (p. 54). Griffiths recommends instead an inclusivist view that endorses one religious account but recognizes the possibility of truths in other religions.⁶ And given this possibility, the question naturally arises for members of any religion whether there are truths of religious significance taught by other religions. Inclusivism therefore provides members of one religion with "a strong impetus . . . toward coming to know the particulars of what alien religions teach; for the home religion may have something important to learn from other religions" (p. 60).

A final consideration comes from looking to history. The growth of knowledge about religious diversity over the last several centuries in the West is surely one of the primary causes of modern religious doubt. Though contented religious exclusivists may seek to reassure people that they are warranted in ignoring religious diversity, people in general have not listened. People have increasingly found the view implausible, and even objectionable, that they alone have the truth. And if one's neighbors of other faiths are not wholly lost or confused, people wonder how this can be. What is the nature of religious experience or the nature of reality such that disparate religions can have some part of the truth? This is the important question that John Hick seeks to answer. But those who find problematic his Kantian distinction between the Real as it appears and as it is in itself need not drop the question.⁷ With a non-Kantian understanding of experience and reality, like that in the work of David Ray Griffin and John Cobb,⁸ one can fruitfully pursue it.

This review has focused on only one theme in recent philosophical discussions of religious diversity; it has therefore regrettably skipped over other insightful parts of these books. In addition to the question of epistemic obligations, Basinger also covers the issues of justified belief, salvation, apologetics, and even pedagogy. Griffiths's book similarly covers questions of how to treat the religious alien and the question of salvation, and it includes a powerful critique of the idea that a state can be religiously neutral. McKim devotes half of his book to a discussion of the

⁶ Griffiths says that the inclusivist shares with the exclusivist the impulse to believe that one's own religion is "especially privileged . . . true in a way that no other set of claims is or could be" (p. 56). But given the possibility of common teachings, it seems that the inclusivist should admit the possibility that another religion may turn out to be as privileged with respect to truth as one's own.

⁷ Phillip L. Quinn and Kevin Meeker, eds., *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) collects some of the best recent evaluations of Hick's project.

⁸ David Ray Griffin, *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism: A Process Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), chap. 7; John B. Cobb, Jr., *Postmodernism and Public Policy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), chap. 2.

religious ambiguity of the world or “divine hiddenness.” But the issue of what communities in disagreement owe each other, an issue where the epistemic questions of religious diversity connect to moral ones, is both central to all three books and important in its own right. And though these books disagree about the details, together they demonstrate the inadequacy of the answer that one can simply close one’s mind.⁹

⁹ I would like to thank Franklin Gamwell and Matthew Bagger for comments that improved this article.