Robert McKim, RELIGIOUS AMBIGUITY AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

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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.


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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
serious problem for theism, it does not [pace Schellenberg and others] pro-
vide the basis for a convincing argument for atheism” (92).

God’s hiddenness does have two important implications, however. First, religious belief should be tentative. “[T]he fact that God is hidden (if
God exists) suggests that one ought to be wary of the claims that the theis-
tic traditions make about God: they probably are claims that exceed what
may reasonably be said with confidence....Mystery...requires a more tenta-
tive, more modest, more agnostic faith” (122-3). Second (and more inter-
esting), if God is hidden, religious belief cannot have the importance that
the religious traditions attribute to it. McKim’s arguments for this claim
are briefly these: The fact that God is hidden when he might not have been
(or when he might have been less hidden than he is) suggests that God
does not place as much importance on belief as theists think he does.
Furthermore, “if God would create the best world that God could create,
then, if God exists, this world in which there is ambiguity, with the result
that some believe and some do not believe, is better than a world in which
it is clear that God exists. If so, it is not likely that belief as such is very
important: if it were, it probably would be clearer than it now is that God
exists” (122 f.). If, on the other hand, God’s goodness would only preclude
him from creating a world in which “we are...deprived by our circum-
stances of any good that is necessary for our long-term flourishing” (120),
then, a similar conclusion still follows: “God’s hiddenness does not deprive
us of any good that is essential” to our flourishing “in spite of the fact that
it has the result that many people do not hold theistic belief” (123). In
either case, then, “it probably is not important that we believe here and
now” (123).

Part II explores related problems created by the fact that judges of
apparently equal intellectual, moral, and spiritual competence hold incom-
patible beliefs about religious matters without there being any non-ques-
tion begging and/or universally compelling way of showing that the reli-
gious beliefs of one set of competent judges (e.g., Christian intellectuals)
are rationally superior to those of another (e.g., Buddhist intellectuals).
McKim argues that in the face of this diversity we should adopt the
“Critical Stance.” This stance is defined by two principles. The first is:

The “E-principle”: “Disagreement [among competent inquirers]
about an issue or area of inquiry provides reason to think that each
side has an obligation to examine beliefs about that issue” (140).

The sort of examination required by the principle should be distinguished
from both “conservative” and “radical” approaches to controversial issues.
The former “is likely to...involve the assumption that the rules for
inquiry...such as rules concerning what you should take for granted, how
far you should go in your investigation, what sort of findings you should
be satisfied with, and what you conceive of as the purpose of engaging in
the process, are dictated by the tradition to which you belong” (147). The
latter regards “everything as ‘up for grabs’; one’s prior commitments are to
be seen as just one of numerous possibilities” with no more claim upon the
inquirer than any other possibility (147). “The process of examination for
which" McKim wishes "to make a case," on the other hand, lies between these two extremes (147).

The second component of the Critical Stance is:

The "T-principle": "Disagreement (of the sort under discussion) about an issue or area of inquiry provides reason for whatever beliefs we hold about that issue or area of inquiry to be tentative" (141).

How tentative should we be? "[T]he extent to which we are open to the possibility that we might be wrong about a belief admits of degrees. There is a spectrum of possibilities that extends from, at one extreme, a recognition that a belief could conceivably need revision to, at the other extreme, thinking it sufficiently likely that we are wrong about it that we barely hold on to it" (156). Tentative belief is belief. Tentatively believing p involves believing that p is true and its denial false, and is incompatible with also believing that "the truth of p remains to be settled" (158). Nevertheless, the sort of belief enjoined by the T-principle occupies an "area between [the] two extremes" lying "toward the latter end of the spectrum" (156, my emphasis).

McKim admits that religious experiences which were as clear and compelling as our experiences of other people or an external world could, in principle, "outweigh the considerations which...make for the Critical Stance" (224). The concluding chapters argue against Alston and others that most religious experiences are not of this sort, and that even those which are (if any) "have, at most, a capacity to support only some of the beliefs that one has in virtue of membership in a religious tradition" (225). McKim concludes that the Critical Stance emerges unscathed.

McKim's theses are important and carefully supported. They are also problematic.

1. Many theists believe that a robust religious faith should be grounded in God's revealed word, not reason. Why should these theists be bothered by McKim's case against the rational appropriateness of robust belief? As McKim puts the objection: "Admittedly there is an opposition between the Critical Stance and orthodox religion; but what makes you think that the Critical Stance should take priority?...if you approach these issues as an exercise in detached reflection, and while presupposing a Western, post-Enlightenment epistemology, there may be something to be said for" your views, but why should we do so (191)? McKim's response is that "if a strong case can be make for the Critical Stance," one should not "be concerned about the fact that it will be found to be unsatisfactory from many religious points of view." The objection "consists in pointing out that the Critical Stance is alien to, and would be opposed by, many religious groups" but that, of course, is just what one would expect. (191-2)

This is too quick, however, for it doesn't answer the orthodox believer's question, namely, why should he or anyone else adopt the post-Enlightenment epistemological standpoint from which the Critical Stance appears reasonable? It won't do to simply rehearse the case for the Critical Stance since the power of that case depends upon the legitimacy of the epistemological standpoint whose credentials are at issue.
2. Deep disagreements aren’t peculiar to religion. They are equally pervasive in morality, politics, philosophy, and the like. Should our opinions in these areas therefore also be held tentatively? McKim’s response is roughly this: Parties to these disputes aren’t always equally competent. “An apologist for slavery,” for example, is “in the grip of a palpably mistaken belief.” In other cases, there may be “no correct position” (200). Where subjectivism or relativism is not an option, however, and the disputants are equally competent, our moral, political, and philosophical beliefs should be held tentatively, although McKim admits that in philosophy, at least, “there are advantages to positions...being taken non-tentatively: advances in the field seem to come in part as a result of the fact that well-defined positions are defended wholeheartedly” (201).

There are difficulties with this. Competent inquirers disagree over the truth of ethical egoism, for example, and the value of a democratic polity. Is it really clear, though, that I should be only a tentative non-egoist or a tentative democrat? There is also something problematic about McKim’s claim that even though each philosopher should hold her beliefs tentatively, philosophy is best served if some philosophical beliefs are held non-tentatively. Assuming that, as a philosopher, I know that the discipline is best served by many philosophers adopting their beliefs wholeheartedly, should I therefore encourage at least some philosophers to ignore their obligations under the T-principle? Should I ignore my own obligation to believe tentatively, that is, should my commitment to the discipline override my commitment to the T-principle? And if it should, why might not something similar be true of religion? For it is at least arguable that Christianity, say, or Buddhism would cease to flourish if most of its members weren’t wholeheartedly committed to it.

3. Can full-blooded religious belief be tentative? After all, “the sort of belief that religions typically recommend, and in some case require, is more than tentative in nature” (159). In response to this question, McKim points out that tentative belief is compatible with many sorts of commitment. Christianity, for example, may “continue to provide you with an interpretation, or partial interpretation, of many phenomena....” (166). It may also “be the focus of many of your hopes,” and you may be “throughly committed to a certain way of life or to certain ways of behaving that have been associated...with your beliefs....” (167). In addition, you may be committed to the Christian community, and “to keeping as many as possible of your [Christian] beliefs intact” compatible with your adoption of the Critical Stance (169-70).

McKim acknowledges, however, that the tentativeness of one’s beliefs will affect the quality of one’s commitment. One’s religious interpretations “will feel more optional” (166), one’s connections to the Christian community will be looser, and the character of one’s trust in God will be different. (McKim asks us to “imagine the implications for my faith that John will meet me at the appointed hour if it isn’t completely clear even that John exists” [176 f.]) Most tellingly, McKim admits that tentative belief should lead the Christian to question “the importance of the project of converting others,” and “some of the more radical biblical injunctions, such as the injunction to care not for the morrow or to love your neighbor as yourself....” (163). Furthermore, “the ten-
tative believer probably will be more willing to abandon her position for the sake of some worthwhile and important earthly good for herself and to think it appropriate to do so if this sort of situation were to arise” (164 f.). In fact, an implication of McKim’s “position is that most martyrs [including those in one’s own tradition] who have died for their faith have been misled” (204). Most traditional theists, I should think, would regard this as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the claim that tentative religious belief can be an adequate substitute for the faith valorized in their traditions. Traditional Christians will be particularly unhappy since it implies that not only Peter and Paul and other early martyrs but Jesus himself were seriously in error.

4. Can’t one tentatively embrace a position which includes the belief that one should hold all of its central beliefs *non*-tentatively? Suppose that Sarah believes that R1, R2,...Rn are good reasons for embracing traditional Christianity and therefore does so but, having adopted the Critical Stance, does so tentatively. So one of the things Sarah now tentatively believes is that her embrace of Christianity should *not* be tentative. And since (as McKim points out) tentative belief *is* belief, she therefore takes steps to ensure that her belief in Christianity will become wholehearted. I do not think that Sarah’s behavior is either incoherent or irrational. But notice that if it is incoherent or irrational, then one can’t coherently or rationally tentatively adopt traditional Christianity even though one may have what appears to one to be good reasons for doing so. (McKim notes an objection lying in this neighborhood in a footnote but “wonders why Christians could not shed this particular belief [that Christian “belief must involve decisive assent”] and yet keep all or most of their other beliefs intact” [267]. The suggestion presumably is that one could tentatively embrace most of the Christian package without even tentatively embracing the belief that Christian belief should be non-tentative. This is doubtful, however, since the valorization of wholehearted belief appears inextricably bound up with Christian beliefs about sin, grace, and salvation. It is difficult to imagine what Paul’s letters would look like, for example, if divested of the belief that assent to the great things of the gospel should be wholehearted.)

In spite of these problems, however, I recommend this book. Anyone interested in issues raised by divine hiddenness or religious diversity, or in the nature of a reasonable religious faith, should examine it carefully. McKim’s arguments are detailed, balanced, and to the point. Future writers on these topics must take them into account.