Philosophy of Religion

7. Religious Diversity

What is the epistemological significance of religious diversity? Does the multitude of different religious beliefs suggest that they are all false, or does it on the contrary suggest that there is some common truth to which they are responding? What should be the reaction of a sincere religious believer who encounters equally sincere believers of other faiths, whose doctrines conflict?

Survey Articles

Nathan L. King, "Religious Diversity and Its Challenges to Religious Belief", *Philosophy Compass* 3 (2008), pp. 830-53, provides an excellent overview, surveying a range of recent literature.

Michael Thune, "Religious Belief and the Epistemology of Disagreement", *Philosophy Compass* 5 (2010), pp. 712-24, considers the issue of religious diversity within the wider context of recent work on the general epistemology of disagreement.

Overview Chapters

Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger, *Reason & Religious Belief* (Oxford University Press: fifth edition, 2010), chapter 14 (pp. 319-43) considers various approaches to the question "Religious Diversity: How can we understand differences among religions?".

William J. Wainwright, "Competing Religious Claims", chapter 10 (pp. 220-41) of *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Religion* (Blackwell, 2005), edited by William Mann, provides another useful discussion along similar lines.

An Informal Discussion

Richard Feldman, "Reasonable Religious Disagreements", chapter 16 (pp. 194-214) of *Philosophers without Gods* (Oxford University Press, 2007), edited by Louise M. Antony, gives a very approachable discussion from the point of view of a "complacent atheist" reflecting on a course taught to American students on "Rationality, Relativism, and Religion".

Hick's Pluralism

Perhaps the best-known response to religious diversity is John Hick's *pluralism*, which aims to accommodate the even-handed idea that many different religions include sincere believers whose credentials are apparently equally strong, and all should therefore be respected as giving access to religious truth. Hick's major book on the topic is *An Interpretation of Religion: Human responses to the transcendent* (Macmillan, 1989 and 2004), especially parts IV and V. More accessibly, his views are considered in the works by King, Peterson *et al.* and Wainwright listed above, but if you want to consider it in more detail, there are several articles in the collection:

Philip L. Quinn and Kevin Meeker (eds), *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity* (Oxford University Press, 2000). The editors' introduction to this collection helpfully summarises the papers, including John Hick's third chapter on "Religious Pluralism and Salvation" (chapter 3), followed by a range of critical responses, some of which are sympathetic and some less so.

Debating Religious Experience

You might also wish to consider, within the Quinn and Meeker volume, the debate between Willam P. Alston, whose chapter 11 – "Religious Diversity and Perceptual Knowledge of God" (pp. 193-207) – aims to defend an orthodox Christian response to diversity of belief; and J. L. Schellenberg, whose chapter 12 – "Religious Experience and Religious Diversity: A Reply to Alston" (pp. 208-17) – aims to refute Alston.

Bear in mind also that as this debate suggests, material on the previous reading list – on religious experience – is also often highly relevant to the topic of religious diversity, since a major objection to the reliability of religious experience is precisely that it has been appealed to in support of so many conflicting beliefs.

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