

Robert McKim. *On Religious Diversity*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

A M I R D A S T M A L C H I A N

Foundation for Interreligious and Intercultural Research and Dialogue

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In eight chapters McKim explores exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist responses to religious diversity and assesses these responses in the light of religious ambiguity. Two of these chapters regard exclusivism and inclusivism about truth. Another two chapters regard exclusivism and inclusivism about salvation. There is one chapter on pluralism and one chapter on religious ambiguity together with an introductory chapter and epilogue. McKim's explorations stem from his identification of an increasing awareness of other religious traditions among believers and an ensuing shifting of attitudes. He takes the case of American evangelist preacher Billy Graham to make his point.

McKim suggests twelve different things alethic exclusivism could mean and thus rejects giving a single definition of alethic exclusivism preferring instead to say that it refers to a range of views. So, on the one end of the scale we have closed alethic exclusivism: 'Our tradition is entirely right, and all other traditions are entirely wrong' (p.14). On the other end of the scale we have the more highly qualified attitude expressed by open alethic exclusivism:

The claims of our tradition are true, or most of them are true, and overall we do best in terms of truth; other traditions are correct when they accept our true claims; and they are mistaken when they reject our true claims; and their claims are generally mistaken. (pp. 30-31)

Alethic inclusivism incorporates some of the sentiments expressed in open alethic exclusivism but in addition also accepts that others actually do fairly well in terms of truth or that it might even be possible to learn from them.

With regard to salvation, McKim distinguishes between views on the means of salvation and views on the beneficiaries of salvation. Then there is the issue of whether particular beliefs are required for salvation. While a salvific exclusivist is sure of the means and/or the beneficiaries of salvation, there are a number of ways a salvific inclusivist can be less certain. A salvific inclusivist could affirm that there is only one means of salvation while not excluding those who unwittingly affirm it or who are not fully aware of what they reject. Alternatively, a salvific inclusivist could affirm that there is more than one means of salvation but that one means of salvation is most effective. McKim gives special attention to a Vatican statement, *Dominus Iesus*, and how it exemplifies some of the issues surrounding inclusivism about salvation which McKim discusses. McKim suggests those traditions which claim a special position for themselves deserve suspicion.

In his chapter on pluralism, covering both issues of truth and salvation, McKim continues to distinguish between different positions which are often

grouped together. He also distinguishes between convergent and nonconvergent pluralism. Convergent pluralism suggests that there can be contradictions between the beliefs of different religious traditions whereas nonconvergent pluralism denies this due to being based on religious relativism. McKim also discusses John Hick's pluralism by following the well-trodden path of criticising the much maligned feature of Hickean pluralism, the Real. According to McKim more sense could be made of the Real if it was morally positive rather than morally neutral, after all, how else is it supposed to aid moral transformation if it is not itself moral? However, one wonders whether the Real has caused too much confusion and whether to understand properly what Hick envisaged by his notion of the Real we need to keep in mind that it was primarily supposed to be a posit which helped explain the success of religious experience. Another interesting discussion in the chapter is how the elephant and duck-rabbit motifs can give rise to two different types of pluralism. With the elephant motif we have a number of groups each misled about the elephant in its entirety due to each knowing only about a part of the elephant. On the other hand, the duck-rabbit motif tells of two different yet equally correct views.

Chapters 2 to 6 see McKim refusing to restrict exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism to definitions. This is sensible given his concern with exploring the field, yet listing the shared features of each *ism* would not have been harmful. In Chapter 7, 'On Religious Ambiguity', McKim defends his view that religion exhibits extremely rich ambiguity, as opposed to merely simple or rich ambiguity. This claim is supported by pointing to ambiguity in the body of data relating to the existence of God. It is suggested that the extent of ambiguity in other bodies of religious data is to be determined on a case-by-case basis. Chapter 8, 'Epilogue: Religious Diversity in the Shadow of Ambiguity', sees McKim outline a very open, if not syncretic, form of religious exploration which he calls the 'global approach'. This approach is to be taken all the more seriously given religious ambiguity. McKim also outlines an approach to salvation which he calls 'reclusivism', an approach which recommends being open minded about the extent to which salvation is available outside a given religious tradition.

Much of McKim's work has been seen before but the arrangement in one volume does give rise to some new material, for example, in the epilogue. McKim is notably non-committal in his work and is even careful to avoid claiming that he has *shown* religion to exhibit extremely rich ambiguity. However, not committing to a particular view on religious truth or salvation does tell of McKim's own eagerness to explore the religious traditions with an open mind and to evaluate them by means of how open they are to this type of exploration and to each other, as well as to religious ambiguity.

The prolegomena approach to religious diversity has also been seen before in Peter Byrne's *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism: Reference and Realism in Religion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995). While Byrne's work was grounded in Rom Harré's philosophy of science and Michael Devitt's philosophy of language, McKim's work is grounded in his study of the religious traditions. Clearly written with many interesting religious anecdotes, *On Religious Diversity* will prove to be a helpful book for anybody wishing to think through an epistemological and soteriological response to religious diversity.