

## BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

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Guy Axtell, *Problems of Religious Luck: Assessing the Limits of Reasonable Religious Disagreement*, Lexington, 2019, 280pp.

Guy Axtell argues that (a lot of) religious belief suffers from luck and that this has consequences for reasonable religious disagreement. Below, I critically discuss the main claims in Axtell's book.

In the first chapter, Axtell distinguishes no less than 6 kinds of religious luck. *Resultant religious luck* is "the (bad/ good) luck of being harmed or benefitted in consequence of an event, action, or decision/ judgment, under conditions of close gaps among persons (...) [w]hen the harm or benefit involves the judgment or interventions of a supernatural being" (p. 11). Examples are found in theologies that posit a strong dichotomy between people destined for heaven or for hell.

A second kind is *crieterial religious luck*. This kind of luck occurs when divine judgment is made on the basis of criteria that are whimsical, or not consistently employed across like cases, or not clear to people affected by divine judgment. Theologies that allow for anonymous participation in saving grace (like some forms of inclusivism) would lead to crieterial religious luck.

The third kind, *constitutive religious luck*, is "bad/ good luck in being the kind of person one is." (p. 16) Examples of subjects who suffer from constitutive religious luck are subjects who lack certain inclinations or abilities to participate in a religious tradition. Axtell argues that some accounts of the *sensus divinitatis* (Plantinga 2000) pose a danger of constitutive religious luck because the *sensus* would be affected by sin.

A subject suffers from *propositional religious luck* when she has good evidence for some religious belief but does not hold the belief *on the basis of* the good available evidence. In cases like these, the subject is just lucky to have good evidence available. According to Axtell, Plantinga's reformed epistemology leads to luck of this sort. On Plantinga's model propositional and doxastic justification come apart, which leads to a devaluation of propositional justification. Here Axtell appears to overlook that Plantinga argues that a religious subject need not have propositional justification. A better example is found in the literature on cognitive explanations of religious belief. Here some argue for a strong distinction between the context of discovery and the context of justification of religious belief (See Jong and Visala 2014). According to them, religious beliefs are often not based upon reasons but on cognitive biases.

A fifth kind is *intervening veritic religious luck*. Here a subject acquires a true religious belief, but we would be inclined to give credit to a supernatural agent for their having that true belief. Axtell's example is drawn from the theology of Karl Barth. In Barth's theology all religions that have ever existed are idolatrous, but the Christian religion (and only the Christian religion) is chosen by God as the locus of his revelation. Subjects who happen to follow the Christian religion happen to be lucky that God intervened and chose their religions.

The final kind, *environmental veritic religious luck*, occurs when a subject forms true religious beliefs by means of an unsafe or insensitive process. In these cases, the subject might have easily acquired a false religious belief. This kind of luck touches on religious diversity and is the main topic of the rest of the book.

1. Axtell notes that many religious believers would easily have had different religious beliefs if they had been raised in a different geographic or demographic location. Here Axtell introduces *inductive risk* as a measure of veritic epistemic religious luck. Inductive risk is “the chance or possibility of getting it [religious belief] wrong in an inductive context.” (p. 57). While having beliefs with a significant degree of inductive risk does not necessarily render a belief irrational or unjustified, it often leads to what Axtell calls “counter-inductive thinking”. Counter-inductive thinking is judging (religious) beliefs of others, that suffer from the same or similar amounts of inductive risk, differently than one’s own.

Environmental veritic religious luck leads to the exceptionalist dilemma. The dilemma applies to religious exclusivists (religious believers who believe that their religious tradition is the only true religion). The first horn of the dilemma says that exclusivists cannot concede that their own belief-forming process is the same process as that of religious others without conceding that the process is unsafe.<sup>1</sup> The second horn says that religious exclusivists cannot claim that their own belief-forming process is unique without relying on *self-favoring* ascriptions of good religious luck. An example of such self-favoring ascriptions is claiming that one’s own religious belief is unique because they are informed by the one true revelation of God. According to Axtell, the belief-forming process must be unique in an adequately formal sense. Axtell does not give an example of a uniqueness claim that is adequately formal. Based on my reading of the book, I believe he suggests that uniqueness claims that are agreed upon by various religious traditions meet this demand. The criterion rules out any appeal to theological reasons for uniqueness or grounding uniqueness in a particular testimonial chain. Axtell also suggests that no adequately formal uniqueness claim is available.

While Axtell rightly notes that many religious believers appeal to tradition-specific reasons to claim uniqueness, he does not do justice to attempts to offer other reasons. A well-known example is the resurrection argument in support of Christianity (See Lewis 2001). An engagement with this and similar arguments would have been appropriate.

Axtell argues that religious believers (like all believers) suffer from “bias blind spots” that make them unable or unwilling to see that their own beliefs are affected by biases just like beliefs of other subjects are. Although these biases affect many beliefs, they mainly affect controversial beliefs, like religious beliefs. One such bias is a tendency to prefer one’s own group (in-group bias). Axtell cites evidence from cognitive science that subjects tend to be blind for their own biases but more attentive to biases in subjects from other groups. This results in charges of bias against other religious traditions without recognizing that one’s own tradition is just as affected.

Bias blind spots might be a problem for the epistemic status of belief, but, according to Axtell, they are foremost problematic for religious dialogue and religious disagreement. Because religious subjects all too often fail to see that their own belief are as liable to biases, they often fail to see that other religious beliefs have similar epistemic statuses. Axtell hereby suggests that religious believers often fail to arrive at equal weight disagreement.<sup>2</sup>

Axtell’s argument based on cognitive biases appears to be cogent. It is unfortunate that Axtell does not engage more with the debate over peer disagreement. When learning about bias blind spots, believers could react in a number of ways. Engaging with the literature on rational disagreement could have led to an interesting discussion on how believers can or should proceed.

The 5<sup>th</sup> chapter is devoted to the relation between epistemic exclusivism (only one religion is true) and salvific exclusivism (only one religion leads to salvation). Axtell argues that the failure to provide ad-

1 A belief is unsafe if it is easily believed when false; see Rabinowitz 2014.

2 Defenders of equal weight disagreement argue that subjects ought to become significantly less confident about a belief if they learn that competitor beliefs ought to be given roughly equal credence (see Christensen 2007).

equately formal uniqueness claims shows that epistemic exclusivist must embrace mutualism – the claim that adherents of other religious traditions are reasonable in maintaining their own religious beliefs even after exposure to one's own beliefs. Axtell adds that a just creator God would not deny salvation to subjects who are holding false but reasonable beliefs in any religious tradition. Therefore, salvific exclusivism is incompatible with epistemic exclusivism.

Axtell is right to note that if God is omnibenevolent, he would not deny salvation to subjects who are reasonably holding false beliefs. One can, however, wonder how many contemporary theologians and philosophers of religion subscribe to both salvific and epistemic exclusivism and thus how much damage Axtell's argument inflicts.

2. In chapter 6, Axtell discusses how cognitive science of religion (CSR) weighs in on epistemic luck. Some CSR-scholars argue that religious beliefs are better described as avowals than beliefs. Axtell connects this view to a Wittgensteinian understanding of religious belief where religious utterances like 'I firmly believe that there will be a Day of Judgment' indicate strong *faith* rather than a high level of factual certainty. According to Axtell, firm faith often comes with high counter-inductive evidence.

Although Axtell shows how some research in CSR is relevant for his overall topic (luck and religious disagreement), he does not draw many clear conclusions. Interesting questions would have been 'Does strong faith stand in the way of religious dialogue and reasonable disagreement?' or 'Is strong faith an epistemic vice because it renders people blind for their counter-inductive thinking?'

Axtell's book is impressive and offers a number of strong arguments against religious exclusivism that should worry its defenders. The book is, however, not an easy read and is sometimes repetitive. Axtell engages with the relevant social and cognitive sciences but does not engage adequately with the literature on epistemic disagreement.

Axtell's discussion is dense and detailed. He, however, seems to avoid making controversial claims or glosses over them when he does. For example, he writes that counter-inductive thinking shows that religious belief often is not safe and hence not knowledge. Such claims are clearly of interest to many philosophers of religion and theologians and deserve more attention.

## REFERENCES

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