CHAPTER 10

I’m Okay, You’re Okay (More or Less)

Robert McKim

Abstract

This essay presents a case for adopting a magnanimous attitude towards those who disagree with us about religious matters. It also presents a case against thinking that there is something wrong with others just because they disagree with us about such matters. The idea of religious ambiguity is central to my reasoning. I explain this idea and some of its implications.

10.1 Magnanimity

I begin by sketching what I will characterize as the “magnanimous outlook.” This outlook has a number of interconnected components. I will mention seven such components.

First, this outlook involves an exploratory and courteous approach to others and to their views. Second, the magnanimous outlook involves recognizing that the tradition or perspective of others is worthy of our interest. For example, their history, ideas, customs, relevant experiences, sacred texts, music, architecture, what it is like to be them, and so on, are worth learning about. It also involves a certain sort of curiosity about others. Curiosity involves wanting to know about, and being interested in, an object of curiosity. But there are different types of curiosity, even with respect to religious others. There is, first, the curiosity of the detached external observer that involves openness to learning about them but not from them. You can have this sort of curiosity about others and want to know about, say, their history, ideas, customs, or relevant experiences even while your attitude to them is that they are outlandish and exotic. However, the curiosity that is part of the magnanimous outlook involves a willingness to learn from others as well as about them. It involves openness to the possibility that they may know or reasonably believe something we are unaware of so that we might be able to enrich our perspective by learning from them.

Third, the magnanimous outlook involves appreciating and being happy with others as they are and, broadly speaking, being pleased by the idea that
they will survive and flourish as they are, if they so wish, and by the thought that their distinct cultural forms will flourish and that they will retain their group identity – assuming, again, that this is their wish. It also involves an absence of any feeling that individuals who disagree with us must become like us, or must come to agree with us, or must join our ranks, in order to be acceptable or to be living well or to flourish in life or the like. Fourth this outlook involves wishing to maintain, or if necessary restore or even create, space that religious others can occupy; cultural space, certainly, but even physical space can be in short supply.

Fifth, the magnanimous outlook involves recognizing that many perspectives on religious matters are endorsed by many people of integrity. By “people of integrity” I mean people who, at least in the ideal case, know a great deal, avoid exaggeration, admit ignorance when appropriate, have an interest in the truth, and are intelligent, serious, sincere, decent, sensible, reflective, and so on. People of this caliber can be found in many religious traditions, and indeed among those who endorse secular perspectives. Such people hold the relevant beliefs in all sincerity and endeavor to live in accordance with them. Roughly speaking, such people are no more common in any one tradition than they are in the others, and people who approximate to this ideal are similarly distributed.1 Or at any rate this is a reasonable operating assumption, a default position to be endorsed till given reason to believe otherwise.

1 There is a burgeoning contemporary philosophical literature on disagreement, much of which is focused on what is referred to as “peer disagreement” and on its implications. As Catherine Z. Elgin puts it, this is disagreement among “opponents [who] are, and consider themselves to be, epistemic peers . . . [and who] have the same evidence, reasoning abilities, training, and background assumptions.” (Elgin, “Persistent Disagreement,” in Disagreement, ed. Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 53–68.) I have no doubt that scholars of religion can learn a great deal from this literature on disagreement but I do not think that religious disagreements typically involve opponents who consider themselves to be epistemic peers when it comes to forming beliefs about matters of religious significance. The opponents – which is to say, the people who hold the various beliefs associated with the relevant competing perspectives – in the religious case may reasonably be assumed, at least in the ideal case, to have much the same reasoning abilities: indeed this is part of what I mean when I say that they include people of integrity. On the other hand they almost certainly do not have the same background assumptions. And – to turn to a matter to which I will devote some attention in this paper – they do not have access to the same evidence. So there is reason to think that such opponents normally are not epistemic peers, where the notion of an epistemic peer is understood in the way I just indicated, so that it includes having the same evidence. While there presumably are some religious disagreements that satisfy the description of disagreement that is widespread in this contemporary philosophical literature on disagreement, the actual religious disagreements that