

Dissent on Core Beliefs: Religious and Secular Perspectives
By Simone Chambers and Peter Nosco (Editors)
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
2015, 244 pages. ISBN 978-1-107-10152-4
Reviewer: Jaco Beyers, University of Pretoria

Introduction

This book forms the 17th title in the Ethikon Series in Comparative Ethics. This publication is edited by Simone Chambers and Peter Nosco. The Ethikon Institute is a non-profit organization supporting research on ethical pluralism. The purpose of this publication is to contribute to the dialogue on the diversity of moral outlooks whether secular or religious. By creating awareness of similarities and differences the Institute endeavours to create peaceful accommodation of diverse opinions. The Institute acts as neutral forum for discussions of different ethical interpretations. The editors indicate that the aim of the book is indeed to ‘contribute to a comparative conversation between and within traditions’ (p. 13).

The contributors to this publication are from tertiary institutions all located in Northern America with one exception from the University of St. Andrews. It is interesting that although from Northern and Western perspective, contributions by authors are on Eastern and Middle Eastern religions. One cannot but wonder if the arguments would have been different if contributors from the Middle East and Eastern regions were included.

The contributions are also inter-disciplinary. Perspectives from political sciences, sociology, philosophy, history, ethics and religious studies are included enriching the kaleidoscope of perspectives.

This publication is intended for all interested in religious studies, whether scholars, students or those concerned with inter-religious encounters. The content makes for easy reading but supposes background knowledge of all religions discussed. It still ought to be considered an academic publication.

Structure and content

The methodology utilised by each contributor is to address a similar set of questions and concerns (p. 13). This makes it easier for the reader to compare different religious perspectives on the same issue. Each chapter follows the same structure: an indication of the key tenets of belief of a particular tradition; examples of dissent from core beliefs; the elasticity of traditions; consequences of dissent; existing diversity within traditions and how do traditions manage dissent. The discussion then concludes by presenting each tradition's ethical treatment of dissent and whether traditions prescribe their way of managing dissent.

The publication consists of eleven chapters (introduction and afterword included) stretching over 244 pages. After an introductory chapter the second chapter deals with dissent within the philosophical tradition of liberalism. Liberalism is identified as the most tolerant of all traditions when it comes to dissent (p. 33). The next chapter deals with Marxism as political tradition. Among Marxist political parties dissent was viewed as a threat to unity and at times severely contained (p.48). Although Marxism seems to have faded away over time, it most probably will continue to exist as theoretical tradition (p. 52). The fourth chapter deals with Natural Law. Natural Law is perceived as a philosophical tradition not reliant on revelation. The connection between Natural Law as philosophical as well as ethico-religious tradition, is based on the rational character of this tradition. Dissent is managed on a rational level although exercising authority becomes part of the solution to maintain unity (p. 68). The next chapter deals with Judaism. The main argument here is that Judaism focusses more on belonging than believing (p. 80) and therefore Judaism is judged as being quite open to pluralism and tolerant of diversity (p. 84). Chapter 6 deals with Christianity. The violent ways in which Christians over centuries reacted to dissent (p. 100-102) is an indication of the level of intolerance. Although internal measures were in place to contain dissent, Christianity ended up as a hugely diverse religion (p. 109) but still flourishing in spite of its divisions. Christianity as the default religion of Western modernity advanced the individual right to be free and have personal choice of belief (p. 111). In the next chapter the heterogeneity of Islam is discussed (p. 137). It is publicly perceived that Islam is divided and highly intolerant at internal division (p. 150). The conclusion however the contributor reaches is that there is not only one way of reacting to dissent within Islam (p. 156). The problem of internal disagreement is aggravated by

post-colonialism and anti-Western sentiment (p. 156). Chapter 8 addresses South Asian traditions such as Hinduism and Sikhism. Based on an historic interpretation of the origin of Hinduism it is clear that diverse traditions existed prior to the 'construction' of Hinduism (p. 167) leading to an extreme tolerant and accommodative Hinduism. Sikhism on the other hand is in battling the maintenance of identity (p. 169) focussed on rigid boundaries and exclusiveness (p. 177). This process is linked to politics and power (p. 182). The next chapter deals with Confucianism. As Confucian was a term used to describe a wide variety of rituals and convictions it was easily abused by political powers to indicate a national unity by describing culture as Confucian. The state became the vehicle stemming dissent and ensuring stability. The state stands central in the beliefs and values of Confucianism (p. 194). Only in recent times with the collapse of a central authority (p. 197) did Confucianism start blossoming into 'hundred schools of thought' (p. 194). In the second last chapter Buddhism is addressed. The approach of this chapter is different than in the other chapters. By recounting four events of dissent in Buddhism (p. 201), the contributor leaves it to the reader to inductively come to an understanding how Buddhism reacts to dissent. Buddhism over time proved to be tolerant and accommodative to adapt to its context (p. 217). In the final chapter the foregoing description of religions in their reaction to dissent is categorised. Three questions are addressed: how do religions react to dissent, what is the relation between traditions and state power and lastly, how do traditions react to feminist and gay activists as form of dissent?

Overall Impression and Relevance to the Field of Religious Studies

This publication is the result of a combined effort in independent research on a central topic of religious dissent and reaction to it. It indeed succeeds in presenting thorough research on a topic not widely discussed, and even less as a comparison between traditions. This publication can be recommended for all scholars interested in understanding the way in which religions react to diversity. The value of this publication lies in its multi-disciplinarity as it holds value for religious studies, philosophical and political perspectives.

The only limitation of the publication is that it is a reflection from a Western perspective. Peter Nosco (p. 201) acknowledges this limitation by

agreeing studying religions can reflect the perspective of the researcher instead of allowing those affiliated to the religion to present a perspective. This publication makes nevertheless for fine reading.

