

Religious Pluralism Reconsidered

Karen Sihra

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

In “Flawed Objections to Religious Pluralism,” Andrew Davis provides a robust and rigorous philosophical refutation to those who argue against religious pluralism in a meaningful way, highlighting early on that liberal responses in favor of religious pluralism — that “reasonable” people should not impose their views on others — can lead to a “pragmatic compromise” rather than a “sustainable universal respect.” Instead, Davis challenges dichotomies found in liberalism through his argument for religious pluralism that does not necessarily exclude the truth claims of another tradition.

While formulating my response to Davis’s essay, the glaring irony of my personal social location became all-pervasive. As someone who was raised in the Sikh tradition, twice in his essay I was reminded that his use of the term religion was limited to a very particular set of beliefs, which did not include my own. In his introduction and a few pages later *in passing* Davis reminds us that he is not talking about all religions but a particular dominant form of religious belief whose social dominance, from a philosophical perspective, necessarily excludes nontheistic faiths.

Additionally, as a member of a group acutely aware of a history marred with communal violence and civil war in the name of religion, I was forced to question where the political entered into Davis’s discussion. Despite the introduction and the all too brief concluding paragraph, there is no mention of why this is a relevant philosophical question in our current political educational climate, nor of what this philosophical exploration can contribute to what I see to be some of the current challenges of conflict transformation facing faith-based tensions and violence.

I can understand why Davis would make these moves given the politically infused nature of any discussion of religion in our present (or even historical) social context. And yet, the project of conflict transformation is not specific to theistic educational issues; nontheistic faiths have not been immune to the tensions found between theistic faiths. As a result, I feel Davis’s exclusion of these faiths and the political does a great injustice to his argument. Particularly, if Davis’s argument is that the differing anthropomorphized visions of a deity do not exclude the truth claims of a particular faith, then why exclude nontheistic faiths from his discussion?

Perhaps these questions stem from a broader inquiry I have of Davis’s work, namely is Davis’s distinction between theistic and nontheistic faiths better described as Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic? Do objections to religious pluralism actually stem from differing exclusivist religious views — that is, the distinction between Unitarian and Trinitarian views of God — or could they be related to their belief in Abraham and his initial covenant with God given that this is perhaps what Davis’s theistic faiths can claim to have in common? Indeed, the distinction between

Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic faiths can be seen as over simplifying broad religious traditions but no more so than a distinction between theisms and nontheisms.¹ However, a focus on the truth claims of a faith — as opposed to the composition of a deity — may allow for a different discussion of Keith Donnellan’s descriptivist/intentional distinctions, William Alston’s notion of “direct reference,” and Davis’s own discussion of the use of metaphor.

Given the confines of this short response essay, I limit my discussion to Davis’s focus: the metaphor of God as a person. I argue that this metaphor is a continual conception in Abrahamic faiths alone. Davis’s belief that there are “increasingly theistic narratives of the *Bhagavad-Gita* [in which] Krishna could play an analogous role in the genesis of the relevant Hindu beliefs” decontextualizes Krishna’s embodiment as Lord Vishnu. Even with such embodiment, the metaphor of God as person may not hold, as Vishnu is not God. Regardless, the idea of God as person is not a focus of Hinduism, nor is it a concern.² As a result I am led to believe that Davis’s inclusion of Hinduism in his critique of Alston is presented to further support his continued consideration of the metaphor. Yet, I fear that there may be some confusion between God and godliness, or perhaps this confusion can even be understood as a difference of a big-G God and small-g god found in Hinduism similar to big-T Truth and small-t truth found in philosophical traditions.³ Krishna, in the *Bhagavad-Gita* can be seen as godly or even as small-g god, however not as God as understood by those in the Abrahamic traditions. As a result, perhaps the truth claims Davis describes in this essay are not actually related to what God *looks* like, but what agreement God made with Abraham.

Nonetheless, perhaps Davis tackles the question of theism for more strategic purposes. In a political context, maybe the question of theisms is a more significant one. If this is the case, then it is unfortunate that there was not more discussion of the political. By referring to the political in the first two paragraphs, citing many of the political issues of the day — Religious Right, Evangelical Christianity — Davis prepared me for a political discussion. His essay fell short of my expectation, and on rereading it, I realized that his initial references to political issues are clearly meant to address specific Christian objections to religious pluralism. This would be unproblematic if we were not presented with such a universalizing philosophical account of the problem, and instead had a philosophically and politically embedded discussion of the philosophical challenges facing Christianity and, say, Islam.

As a result, I found myself wondering whether Davis’s restricted discussion of religion could be interpreted as a political move that actually allows for religious exclusion and militant protectionism that he so vigorously and successfully (in a philosophical context) rejects. Does the Religious Right in the United States, for example, actually find issue with other faiths because of their genuine belief in their God? Or is it a xenophobia stemming from misrepresentation and universalizing interpretations of the “other”? Turning the question into a purely philosophical debate I fear may be somewhat dangerous as it “gives excuses” to potentially violent opinions in the name of religion.

Despite my questions and objections, Davis's essay provides us with a superb point of entry to a historically rooted ongoing dilemma. I very much appreciated the opportunity this essay provided to think through these challenges and look forward to Davis's continued work on this topic, specifically around the implications of this analysis on educational policy.

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1. Adam Dodds, "The Abrahamic Faiths? Continuity and Discontinuity in Christian and Islamic Doctrine," *Evangelical Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (2009): 230–53.
 2. Mohandas K. Gandhi, *The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi* (Berkeley, Calif.: Berkeley Hills Books, 2000).
 3. Karen Sihra and Helen M. Anderson, "Exploring Pedagogical Possibilities for a Nonviolent Consciousness," in *Philosophy of Education 2009*, ed. Deborah Kerdeman (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2009).