

4-24-2020

## Becoming Theologically Promiscuous: Exploring Religious and Ethical Pluralism

Kathryn Eggersdorfer

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University*, KEGGERSDO001@CSBSJU.EDU

---

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/ur\\_cscday](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/ur_cscday)

---

### Recommended Citation

Eggersdorfer, Kathryn, "Becoming Theologically Promiscuous: Exploring Religious and Ethical Pluralism" (2020). *Celebrating Scholarship and Creativity Day*. 111.  
[https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/ur\\_cscday/111](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/ur_cscday/111)

---

Katie Eggersdorfer  
Scholarship and Creativity Day Manuscript  
4/23/20

### Becoming Theologically Promiscuous: Exploring Religious and Ethical Pluralism

Dr. Kristin Colberg introduced the concept of religious pluralism with the question: *Why would God tell [the] story of salvation in only one way, for only some people to understand?* Sri Ramakrishna, a theologian whose work I will continue to reference throughout this paper, is a helpful addition to better understanding this introduction. He did not preach a theology that absolved difference, nor did he equate all religions without care for their individual integrities (Maharaj 183); rather, he argued that “God has made different religions to suit different aspirants, times, and countries. All doctrines are so many paths; but a path is by no means God Himself” (188).

Doing theology by engaging a diversity of faith traditions helps us to extend beyond mere tolerance and helps us refrain from falling into relativism. Within this framework we are able to embrace others and love them on their own terms whilst growing in the context of the faith tradition where we most flourish. Developing theology that acknowledges, respects, and celebrates differences is vital to living as our full authentic selves in that it teaches us to affirm different experiences of the divine in relation to human existence.

Let religious pluralism not be reduced to tolerance. Tolerance is something that is often discussed and, in my experience with and perception of the liberal mainstream, usually praised. It is a worthy endeavor to turn our understanding of tolerance into a constructive critique. As Ivanhoe argues, “Most advocates of tolerance do not require us to understand, in any substantial way, the views that we are asked to tolerate; rather, we only have to know enough about them to know that they do not violate some minimal level of moral acceptability” (320). This explanation is a helpful push towards developing a self-awareness of how we treat others and how we regard our own perspectives and practices. While tolerance is certainly a more inclusive and less harmful path than intolerance or blatant condemnation, it also “offers a convenient and appealing excuse for not engaging, learning about, and coming to appreciate the nature of these alternative forms of life” (Ivanhoe 321).

A nuance of religious pluralism deemed *ethical promiscuity* was introduced to me early in my research on religious pluralism, explained by Philip J. Ivanhoe in his article entitled *Pluralism, Toleration, and Ethical Promiscuity*. In short, ethical promiscuity addresses and goes beyond pluralism, moral relativism, and tolerance to argue that the irreducible and irreconcilable differences among valid sets of values that the human person can experience should be explored and celebrated.

To draw on the work of Catherine Keller from *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process*, there is a way of doing theology that falls neither into absolutism nor relativism; the concept of relationality, particularly as it is achieved through process theology, provides an engaging theological path that seeks for humans to be in relationship to one another and

refrains from dissolving individual differences. She argues, “relationality saves pluralism from relativism” (Keller 21) and directs us to a way of thinking that has both inspired and underscored much of my argument for religious pluralism. Engaging relationship and raw, honest conversation – which entails “honest questions, doubts, observations, [and] differences” – is *not* blind and uncaring acceptance of whatever worldview or whomever believes it (Keller 8). As Keller states, “this does not mean ‘anything goes,’ as absolutists fear. *Many* things go, and some better than others. Discernment between ways better and worse, between the promising directions and the dead ends, never ceases” (10). Ivanhoe’s endorsement of ethical promiscuity is much like Keller’s in that it “rejects some values and forms of life as repugnant and is just as capable as any other ethical stance of criticizing individual practices within a given form of life” (325). Thus, such proponents of religious and ethical pluralism are not careless and without understanding that there are certain practices that are harmful to humans and to all of creation.

The previously mentioned concepts of religious pluralism and ethical promiscuity do not ask an individual to abandon the religion, faith practice, set of beliefs or moral code which exists in accordance with their individual conscience. Like Ivanhoe argues, ethical promiscuity is possible by recognizing that one person’s way of life is not, and cannot be, the only correct way to live; he states, “Human lives are complex – individually, interpersonally, and more broadly, socially... no single human life or social system does, or even can, instantiate all of the values that are possible for creatures like us” (314).

### Works Cited

Colberg, Kristin. *Catholic Church Today* Course, 11 November 2019, Collegeville, MN. Lecture.

Ivanhoe, Philip J. “Pluralism, Tolerance, and Ethical Promiscuity.” *Journal of Religious Ethics*, vol. 37, no. 2, June 2009, pp. 311-329. EBSCOhost, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9795.2009.00388.x.

Keller, Catherine. *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process*. Fortress Press, 2008. ACLS Humanities Ebooks, pp. 2-25. [https://www.fulcrum.org/epubs/mk61rh551?locale=en#/6/10\[ xhtml00000005\]!/4/1:0](https://www.fulcrum.org/epubs/mk61rh551?locale=en#/6/10[ xhtml00000005]!/4/1:0), Accessed 25 Feb. 2020.

Maharaj, Ayon. “God Is Infinite, and the Paths to God Are Infinite’: A Reconstruction

and Defense of Sri Ramakrishna's *Vijnāna*-Based Model of Religious Pluralism." *Journal of Religion*, vol. 97, no. 2, Apr. 2017, pp. 181-213. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1086/690478.