

Book Review

Olli-Pekka Vainio.

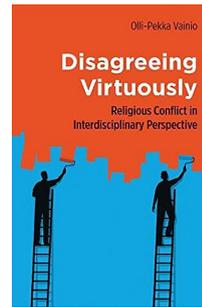
Disagreeing Virtuously: Religious Conflict in Interdisciplinary Perspective.

Foreword by Rob Barrett.

Grand Rapids, MI, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017.

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Reviewed by Judith C. P. Lin. PhD Candidate in Church History,
Fuller Theological Seminary.



Olli-Pekka Vainio takes up one of the most pressing issues of our day—religious conflicts. Incorporating voices from the history of ideas, cognitive sciences, analytic philosophy of religion, and virtue theories, Vainio’s work is accessible for anyone interested in the subject matter. As pointed out by Rob Barrett in the foreword, while Vainio’s project primarily addresses Christian readers, his work is not narrowly Christian (x).

The book’s central thesis is that it is not only possible, but desirable, to learn to disagree virtuously in religious conflicts. Vainio frames his argument first of all by exploring the views of selected theologians and philosophers on the pursuit of knowledge and (religious) disagreement, demonstrating that the conflicts that we face today are nothing new. Then, Vainio turns to contemporary psychology and philosophy to explicate why the inherent biases in human cognitive are but a natural result of human development. He then raises an obvious question: do biases render truth claims of particular religions untrustworthy? Drawing insights from scientific and epistemological perspectives on religious belief, Vainio challenges the thought that widespread religious disagreement would undermine the truth claims of particular religions. He also argues against granting doubt too prominent a place in religious faith or the formation of belief.

Instead, Vainio argues for a “dynamic view” of epistemic rationality as we approach religious disagreements, which allows us to hold fast our beliefs even when our convictions are “partially defeated” by opposing positions (136).

Does it mean that biases remain unchecked? By no means. In the final chapter—the heart of the book—Vainio ushers in the discussion of virtue. Without simplifying the matter, Vainio suggests the necessity of resorting to such virtues as open-mindedness, humility, courage, and tolerance, in times of disagreement. For Vainio, biases are to be curbed not by doubt, but by virtues. In contrast to the view that religion is at times a “conversation-stopper” (42-4), Vainio—without being utopian—regards religious conflicts as opportunities for Christian churches to exemplify to the world how it is possible to disagree virtuously in conflicts, without losing their identity (185-6).

In an age when conflicts abound, Vainio believes that it is critical to educate people to act more virtuously: “After all, what would be the option? To *not* teach people about virtues? We will fail in many ways in this endeavor, but this does not diminish our obligation to strive for ideal performance” (156). While his foundation is a Christian one, the “thickness” of his narrative—involving interlocutors from various disciplines—does justice to a subject that is as complex and arduous as *conflict*. Even though some pages may appear to be rather technical for readers unfamiliar with certain

disciplines, Vainio presents arguments in such a lucid manner that his work is, in general terms, easy to follow and digest.

Disagreeing Virtuously is not merely a book for the academic circle or classroom settings. It is more than fitting to study the book in a religious setting, where communities of faith reflect what disagreeing virtuously entails in their specific context. And while his current study is set foremost in the Western context, Vainio's text can be easily translated into non-Western contexts, insofar as all religions and cultures share similar virtue vocabulary (142).

Rigorous as Vainio's research is, however, it seems that his focus is mainly on the individual's place in disagreements (and underlying contributing factors), as opposed to the role or dynamics of community. Granted, community is the sum total of individuals there within; *but it is also more*. In addition, the religious conflicts that arise in the public sphere nowadays, more often than not, involve ideology clashes between one (religious) institution (as

opposed to individuals) and another. Thus, I wonder if Vainio could have expanded the final section of the book, in which he considers how communities, ideologies, and identities inform the discussion of religious disagreement, and how virtue functions in their interplay. I also wonder what Vainio's work would look like had he included voices from political science. A minor critique concerns writing style. As readers most likely will not be versed in all disciplines, spelling out acronyms for technical terms would help readers follow the narrative more easily.

These critiques aside, *Disagreeing Virtuously* is a constructive, timely, and hopeful contribution to our time and age. While conflicts have always been part of history, the intensity of conflicts looms large nowadays due to the concept of global village. If we are to see humans flourish to the highest possible degree, it is incumbent on concerned global citizens to learn how to disagree better. Vainio has pointed us to a feasible direction.