

Christophe Grellard. *La possibilità dell'errore. Pensare la tolleranza nel Medioevo. Flumen Sapientiae. Studi sul pensiero medievale 12.* Roma: Aracne editrice, 2020. 192 p. ISBN: 9788825531985. Paperback: € 16

Reviewed by STEPHEN M. METZGER
Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana
s.metzger@vatlib.it

In 2015 the Department of Philosophy at Maynooth University hosted the SIEPM's annual colloquium dedicated to the theme "Tolerance and Concepts of Otherness in Medieval Philosophy".¹ Several participants drew attention to the incongruity of a theme linking the idea of 'tolerance' to the Middle Ages, because quite obviously one cannot find such a conception during that period defined in ways familiar to twenty-first century society. The Latin verb *tolerare*, meaning to bear or to endure, was often used, above all in theological or religious contexts, to express the idea of enduring one's sufferings or trials. Indeed, it would take the wars of religion in Early Modern Europe, John Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), and the Enlightenment for the notion to become an essential part of modern society. Nevertheless, participants at the Colloquium highlighted either the ways in which medieval writers presented how one should interact with people belonging to different cultures and religions as a sort of inchoate form of modern tolerance or the ways in which medieval writers confirmed in their texts the intolerance that has long been considered (often to the point of stereotype) a hallmark of the Middle Ages.

In *La possibilità dell'errore: Pensare la tolleranza nel Medioevo*, Christophe Grellard agrees that the modern notion of 'tolerance' did not exist in the Middle Ages for the simple reason that historical, cultural, and intellectual conditions were not sufficient for such a concept to develop (p. 9). The goal of his book, therefore, is to trace a genealogy for the modern concept in medieval theological and juridical writings. As occurs for many cases in the history of philosophy and science, the Middle Ages provided the essential groundwork for the flourishing of a modern idea. Interestingly, his endpoint to justify this way of proceeding is not the emergence of the notion of tolerance during the Enlightenment but rather the Apostolic Constitutions of Vatican Council II, especially sections in *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes*, which concerned the status of non-Christian people. He finds in these texts the culmination of a line of thought, the origins of which lie in the Middle Ages (p. 10).

The book began as a series of lectures delivered at the University of Trent in 2018. It is divided into three chapters corresponding to the three sessions of his presentation. The first considers the theme of 'invincible ignorance', the second the issue of an erring conscience,

¹ The proceedings of this meeting have recently appeared: *Tolerance and Concepts of Otherness in Medieval Philosophy*. Acts of the XXI Annual Colloquium of the Société Internationale pour l'Étude de la Philosophie Médiévale, Maynooth, 9–12 September 2015, edited by M. William Dunne and S. Gottlöber, *Rencontres de philosophie médiévale 25* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2022).

and the third treats the problem of the rights of conscience and religious difference with special attention paid to heretics and idolaters. These three parts relate test cases rooted in either imagined or real problems that arose in the midst of academic debate in the Middle Ages.

Each chapter contains subsections arranged in chronological order by author that trace the development of arguments on each specific theme from the time of Peter Abelard in the twelfth century (the first subsection in chapter 1) to Bartolomé de las Casas in the sixteenth century (the last subsection of chapter 3). These chapters are in a sense telescopic with the successive one building on the findings of the previous, notwithstanding the separate focus in each one. In this way, the last two chapters start roughly a hundred years further in time than their predecessors; chapter 1 begins with Peter Abelard (as mentioned above), chapter 2 with Thomas Aquinas, and chapter 3 with William Ockham, but it is helpful to have in mind the distinctions made by Abelard when reading Ockham and later writers on problems related to a person's conscience in chapter 3.

Betraying its origin as a series of public lectures, each chapter contains many block quotations from the texts under discussion. One can imagine that such texts appeared on a screen behind the author in the course of his presentation. While the use of such quotations is certainly laudable and necessary when one needs to break down the parts of a complicated argument, from a rhetorical point of view it gives the text an uneven quality, as so many quotations continually interrupt the pace of the exposition. This impression is reinforced by the fact that often times in the course of his explanation of the position of a given medieval author, Grellard essentially summarizes or paraphrases the text quoted. Considering that the Latin original is often presented in full in the footnote, one wonders, on the one hand, if it was absolutely necessary to give such long quotations in Italian translation in the main text. On the other hand, given that the general knowledge of the Latin language is not what it once was, even among specialists in medieval philosophy, the Italian translations are no doubt a help to readers. To be sure this is a small criticism. In general, the text, the Italian for which was edited by those involved in the arrangements for the lectures, is easy to read, and Grellard does a fine job explicating the arguments with lucidity and precision.

The key distinction in Grellard's argument that, according to him, lays the groundwork for the appearance of the modern notion of 'tolerance' is the gradual separation of what one believes from what is necessary to be saved. In other words, recognition of the epistemological problem that a person's salvation is not necessarily related to that person's beliefs or even faith within a given tradition. The unbreakable bond between truth and salvation, therefore, was rendered asunder progressively in the Middle Ages. This movement coincided with the separation of heterodoxy as a legal, juridical problem to one of individual belief and conscience. The problem became not an issue of adhering to a set of propositions or claims but rather to what an individual thought and under what conditions that person believed him or her to be correct in thinking and judgment.

One can see this quite clearly in the structure of the book itself. The first chapter traces developments and refinements in thinking about those who suffer from what is called 'invincible ignorance'. This means that a person who does not know any better concerning for example the truths of the Christian religion cannot be held accountable according to their precepts and regulations. Similarly, in chapter 2 Grellard recounts the evolution of thinking concerning an 'erring conscience'. One must follow one's conscience to perform good and moral acts, but if that conscience is malformed or in fact erroneous, can such a person's acts still be considered as offences? As we know, freedom of conscience is also a hallmark of modern thinking. It is this chapter that Grellard embarks on an examination that can most clearly be considered philosophical because, as he says, it concerns a theme fundamental to moral philosophy: the existence of good and evil in themselves and the hierarchy of norms (with the possibility for autonomy) (p. 59). Finally, in chapter 3 Grellard examines the complexity of the issue of heterodoxy in late medieval thought, for which he is an acknowledged specialist. The famous case is that of Ockham who argued that one may be judged a heretic by external authority but be, in fact, orthodox because that external authority, i.e., the pope, is in error. Grellard traces the development of such ideas as Ockham's all the way to the Early Modern period and the encounter between Europeans and the indigenous of the 'New World'.

Grellard has done a masterful job presenting the complexity of these issues. This book is a wonderful introduction to the subject as it presents the main lines of the debates and their problematic. It is grounded not only on a mastery of the original texts from which he formulates his arguments but also makes use of recent historiography concerning the notion of tolerance and the transition from the medieval period to the modern. It deserves to be read by all who have an interest in the development of the modern notion of tolerance and its concomitant issues.