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Book Review: Teaching Interreligious Encounters

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and those who are profiteers, egoists, and/or coercive and abusive to their followers. When discussing Orthodox elders, on the other hand, Frost waxes eloquently about their virtues, while failing to acknowledge that chicanery and abuse are rampant problems in the Orthodox world as well (311-312).

Because of these tendencies, the book ultimately fails as a work of comparative theology. Those looking for an Orthodox version of Catholic comparative theologians such as Raimon Pannikar or Francis Clooney will be disappointed. As Frost herself acknowledges, her book “provides a way to train Christians in the art of listening to Hindus and an opportunity for Hindus to ponder the life-changing implications of a Christian approach to God” (319). Instead of accomplishing the comparative theological goal of learning more about God from each other, Frost provides only a way for Hindus to learn from the Orthodox, while the Orthodox simply learn to be less judgmental and disparaging of Hindus.

The Human Icon is a skillfully written and well-researched text and should be of great interest to some readers, while somewhat disappointing for others. For Eastern Orthodox theologians and practitioners, it is a

welcome exploration of what Eastern Orthodox Christians and Hindus have in common, and it provides a roadmap for future efforts at interreligious dialogue between Hindus and Orthodox. Moreover, Frost’s inclusivist theology of religions will provide many Orthodox readers with ways to conceptualize how theological truths are not the exclusive property of the Eastern Orthodox Church. For non-Orthodox readers, *The Human Icon* will also serve as an excellent introduction to the comparison of Hindu and Eastern Christian beliefs and practices from an Orthodox perspective. On the other hand, readers who hold to a pluralist theology of religions may find this text limited in its analyses due to its underlying premise that Orthodox Christianity uniquely contains the “fullness of truth” in a way that Hinduism does not. Moreover, those working in the field of comparative theology may find that *The Human Icon’s* focus on theology of religions and interreligious dialogue ultimately undermines any positive comparative theological contributions the book may otherwise have had.

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***Teaching Interreligious Encounters.* Edited by Marc A. Pugliese and Alexander Y. Hwang. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 368 pages.**

INTERRELIGIOUS encounters permeate our culture, the university, and many of the personal and public corners of our lives. As suggested in the title, *Teaching Interreligious Encounters* explores the art of teaching, including pedagogical theory, actual lesson plans and classroom activities, suggested texts, and narratives for how and why

particular approaches to teaching interreligious studies work. This multidisciplinary volume is the fruit of the American Academy of Religion/Luce Summer Seminars on Comparative Theology and Theologies of Religious Pluralism (2009-2013). The book is divided into five sections, each emphasizing a different method of encounter:

Theorizing Encounters; Designing Encounters; Textual Encounters; Practical Encounters; and Formational Encounters.

Part I includes seven chapters that each look at specific theoretical underpinnings of interreligious learning. Jeannine Hill Fletcher begins this section by emphasizing the role that the instructor has in shaping what counts as religion. Prioritizing certain narratives and scriptures over others can lend authority to those narratives, thus it is critical to centralize previously marginalized voices, including women and minorities. Fletcher gives particular attention to the absence of women religious thinkers/leaders in a variety of textbooks and looks at how the inclusion of a special section on women or the particular focus on women's biological difference may actually work to maintain established androcentric religious perspectives.

Next, Leo D. Lefebure looks at the late Japanese Buddhist scholar, Masao Abe and considers how his life and work exemplify comparative theology as a method that openly begins from a particular religious commitment, encounters another tradition, then returns to the tradition of origin with new insights. Lefebure suggests both benefits and drawback to Abe's approach.

J. Derrick Lemons then integrates Pierre Bourdieu's ethnographic, sociological work on reflexivity with Francis X. Clooney and James L. Fredericks' comparative theology. Lemons includes examples from an introductory course he teaches to emphasize the possibility of "reflexive comparative theological skills."

In the essay that follows, Hsiao-Lan Hu argues that learning about pluralism is not nearly as effective as providing an environment and model for embodying it. He looks specifically at Judeo-Christian approaches that appear to reify particular concepts of "Religion" versus an East-Asian

approach that integrates a variety of "Teachings," and thereby demonstrates a pluralistic approach to learning about diverse traditions.

Robert McKim turns next to the concept of neutrality and the demand that an instructor should remain neutral towards a variety of truth claims while teaching religious studies. McKim examines how standards are established and how facts about truth claims are evaluated in a "neutral" context.

Next, Marianne Moyaert engages the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur to reflect upon hermeneutical, anthropological and pedagogical principles. Here, selfhood is understood as "interconnected with and constituted by otherness." Moyaert then explains how she applies these concepts in scriptural reasoning with her diverse student body at VU University Amsterdam.

Lastly in this section, Louis Komjathy explores some basic principles of comparative theology from his perspective as a scholar/practitioner of Daoist theology and how these affect the basic parameters of his classroom. Komjathy proposes a normative polytheistic or pluralistic theological view such that different religious accounts are understood as describing different realities with different soteriological consequences.

Part II, *Designing Encounters*, includes four chapters that look more specifically at teaching interreligious encounters. This section of the book will be especially helpful to graduate students who are new to teaching and to experienced professors who are interested in expanding their repertoire. First, Imranali Panjwani examines certain challenges that exist in teaching Islamic studies in western universities including the scope and relationship between the subject of Islam and the people who practice Islam, and underlying mindsets/prejudices. Panjwani

then discusses course outlines and specific techniques for teaching Islam at a university.

Hans Gustafson begins his chapter with a thoughtful example of coursework from a student who had studied Hinduism and Christianity comparatively. His chapter, subtitled “A Primer on Undergraduate Course Design,” describes course content, activities, assignments, and offers points for facilitating interreligious encounters, both textual and in person, as a new course, or as material to be integrated into an existing introductory course on World Religions.

In the following chapter, Joshua R. Brown presents material for “Teaching Comparative Political Theology.” In particular, Brown looks at text selection and desired learning outcomes. While his theoretical approach can be broadly applied, he grounds his discussion in a classroom example that compares Christianity and early Chinese traditions. This is a helpful approach and might speak especially to those at smaller universities or where interreligious learning is a new approach since Brown’s consideration of learning outcomes translates, in effect, the various skills learned in comparative religious studies into terms that can be appreciated by both students and department administrators.

Devorah Schoenfeld and Jeanine Diller next discuss the art of disagreement in comparative theology using *Hevruta*, a traditional Jewish method of study. The chapter details exercises for introducing students to the method, text interpretations, and directions for facilitating classroom discussions. The authors contend that the emphasis on disagreement and the process of *hevruta* study can motivate students to want to do comparative theological work.

Part III turns to Textual Encounters and looks more specifically at four examples of textual comparisons that the authors have

successfully used in the classroom. Daniel Maoz and Allen Jorgenson reflect on their experience co-teaching *Exodus* from two different religious perspectives. This is part of an ongoing project whereby the authors team teach different texts and the chapter is creatively presented to mirror the act of dialogical team teaching, whereby each author contributes separately, building upon and responding to the other.

Hussam S. Timani provides a review of a number of central texts and chapters that the author has found useful for teaching religious pluralism and comparative theology. Timani also touches on scriptural reasoning, service-learning activities, and Islamic approaches to religious diversity.

Next, Thomas Cattoi discusses his experience leading a joint seminar reading of Ignatius of Loyola’s *Exercises* and Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (*The Way of the Bodhisattva*). Using specific examples from the textual comparison Cattoi addresses confessional, dialogical theology and the effort to be “vulnerable,” to the other, yet grounded in a specific tradition.

In the final chapter on textual encounters Jonathan Edelman introduces specifically Hindu techniques for reading and teaching the *Bhagavad Gītā* as a method to avoid appropriation and mistaken interpretations. Edelman looks specifically at commentarial traditions, epistemological categories, historical context, and key terms, and then traces these themes through particular parts of the text.

Part IV, Practical Encounters, looks at case studies, site visits, and immersion programs. The first author in this part, Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, who examines sacred spaces, states: “Who we are is inextricably related to where we are physically and existentially.” The chapter considers different forms of sacred

space and introduces the idea that interreligious learning can constitute a “third space” that is open to connection in new and unexpected ways.

Authors Emily Sigalow and Wendy Cadge discuss case studies as a method for teaching interreligious encounters. Although the Pluralism Project at Harvard University has been documenting case studies for the past two decades, the authors here note that scholars of religious studies have been slow to adopt this approach for use in the classroom. As the chapter aptly demonstrates, examples from real life interreligious dilemmas provide an engaging context for both readers and potential students to grapple with core religious concepts and the challenges of pluralism.

Next, Brandan W. Randall and Whitney Barth also engage the use of case studies with a more focused look at how or if the use of the case study method would promote a “pluralistic disposition,” in students. Results of this study highlight the importance of including multiple voices and perspectives. In particular, conservative students feared a liberal bias and were thus less likely to fully engage with the material.

Lastly, in this section Marianne Farina, CSC and Robert W. McChesney, SJ consider study abroad or intensive immersion experiences as invaluable opportunities for interreligious encounters. The authors point out that immersion experiences offer a unique, intrinsic, motivation for interreligious learning. They also suggest that this experience can be strengthened in several ways including a contextual model for learning abroad and by offering students an opportunity to share and meet with others who have studied abroad.

Part V, Formational Encounters, turns towards questions of vocation and civic

engagement. Eboo Patel and Cassie Meyer begin this final section with a chapter on methods for teaching interfaith leadership, which they describe as being “about creating positive interactions between those who orient around religion differently.” This practice is aimed at working towards the common good and building religious pluralism, that is, a context for the positive engagement of diversity. Taking a step beyond the book’s title, *Teaching Interreligious Encounters*, Patel and Meyer focus on forming strong leaders who will teach and work in communities.

In the next chapter Kelly R. Arora brings attention to the value of teaching *interspiritual* dialogue to health care and pharmacy professionals. She notes that this approach has been appreciated in the fields of palliative care and by hospice workers, but that the importance of diversity, including diverse religious, cultural, and spiritual beliefs is a relevant factor for successfully treating health and illness. This chapter includes a course outline for a class on interspiritual dialogue for health care professionals.

In the last chapter of Part V, Patricia Zimmerman Beckman suggests that global travellers share the language and intentions of many religious mystics and scholars of mysticism. She also proposes that the interreligious study of mysticism may help these travelling seekers to find greater experiences of ultimate meaning, transformation, and cultural exchange. This chapter engages new-age or spiritual-but-not-religious perspectives with genuine challenges that are grounded in a respectful, but serious, pedagogy of interreligious studies.

Teaching Interreligious Encounters covers a broad scope of interreligious encounters and, as a whole, develops a nuanced discourse for re-thinking interreligious dialogue and

pedagogy. However, the major strength of this volume is that each theoretical and methodological consideration is presented alongside concrete examples and practical suggestions.

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