Teaching Interreligious Encounters

Pugliese, Marc A.; Hwang, Alexander Y.,eds.
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Book Review

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As many of the contributors to *Teaching Interreligious Encounters* point out, interactions with people of diverse religious commitments are becoming more frequent in the workplace, in civic affairs, and in many neighborhoods. Consequently, there is a need to help individuals develop the attitudes and aptitudes that will enable them to conduct those encounters in an informed, respectful, and personally satisfying fashion. This volume argues that education, particularly in the undergraduate classroom, can make a substantial contribution to preparing individuals to understand and participate effectively in a religiously diverse society. To that end, the contributors offer an array of resources, comments on course and assignment design, and concrete strategies to show students how to conduct themselves in and learn from "interreligious encounters."

Precisely what is entailed in such encounters and how they are to be enacted and understood receive a variety of answers throughout the book. At times, whatever lines might separate inter*faith* engagement from inter*religious* encounters, and either from comparative theology, and all of them from comparative religion do not appear in sharp focus. Some authors appear to use at least several of those terms as rough equivalents, while others strive to define their terms very clearly. For example, Eboo Patel and Cassie Meyer propose that "interfaith or interreligious studies is concerned primarily with the interactions between lived religious and nonreligious actors and communities" (300). Thus, they differentiate it from "comparative religions, comparative theology, and world religions" which they see as being less concerned with actual relationships and interactions. But several contributors cite with approval Francis Clooney's statement that comparative theology "entails the interpretation of the meaning and truth of one's own faith by means of a critical investigation of other faiths" (see 45), which would bring it closer to Patel and Meyer's understanding of interfaith and interreligious studies.

How to construct courses, course modules, and individual assignments to promote what Patel and Meyer call “interfaith literacy” receives a lot of attention. Joshua Brown, for example, describes and analyzes a course on political theology that uses examples from Christianity and Chinese religions. Jonathan Edelman provides a detailed consideration of the Bhagavad Gita as a theological text. Other authors focus more on pedagogical strategies. In one of the more interesting contributions, Devorah Schoenfeld and Jeanine Diller describe how they use the Jewish process of *hevruta* to encourage students to disagree with each other in their interpretations of texts while still remaining in conversation, recognize disagreements within and among religions, and value interreligious disagreement. Emily Sigalow and Wendy Cadge make a clear and strong case for the value of using case studies in teaching about interreligious encounters, something that several other contributors also mention.

Most of the contributions emphasize that students can learn something personally valuable and meaningful from studying and especially participating in interactions with people who have religious commitments different than their own. This volume offers a rich set of suggestions about how to design and structure such learning opportunities.

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