Review Essay

New Ventures into the Field of Interreligious Dialogue

Books Reviewed: Catherine Cornille, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2013; Daniel S. Brown, Jr., ed., *A Communication Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue: Living within the Abrahamic Traditions*. Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2013; Daniel S. Brown, Jr., ed., *Interfaith Dialogue in Practice: Christian, Muslim, Jew.* Kansas City, MO: Rockhurst University Press, 2013.

These three volumes represent fifty individual contributions to the topic of interreligious dialogue. In this essay I will concentrate on providing a flavor of the approach taken in each volume and, where possible, on those contributions which relate closely to the study of Islam and Muslims. I will discuss the three titles in the order they have been cited above and then offer a short conclusion.

The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue represents a useful introduction to both the theoretical and the practical issues raised by interreligious dialogue as well including a number of case studies of interreligious dialogue. Ten chapters comprise the focal topics of part 1 and seventeen chapters comprise the case studies of part 2. The topics covered by the chapters are quite wide ranging and show a good deal of originality in that they do not feature widely in the extant interreligious dialogue literature. For example, in part 1 there is a chapter on art and interreligious dialogue and another on interreligious worship; and in part 2, of the various possible religion combinations, there are chapters on Shinto-Buddhist dialogue and Confucian-Jewish dialogue. All of the chapters of part 2 give some space to outlining the history of the interreligious relations which they discuss and all (with one exception) are acknowledged to be written from one side of a relationship rather than the other.

Turning to some of the chapters of the volume we can begin by noting Leonard Swidler's history of interreligious dialogue in chapter 1. Swidler charts the rise of interreligious dialogue and the increasing awareness of its need, postulating that we are now facing a significant new era in human his-

tory which he calls the "Age of Global Dialogue." For all the insight, however, it appears that the editor was unable to curb Swidler's citation of web links and even personal email addresses in the body of his article, not to mention a number of references to *Wikipedia* articles. Chapter 2 discusses some of the preconditions for effective interreligious dialogue and chapter 3 looks at dialogue involving monks of various religious traditions. One can imagine that there are Muslim groups which approximate monastic orders yet there is no mention of them and so one wonders what the reason could be for this. Chapters 4 and 5 cover different approaches to examining scripture, that is, comparative theology and scriptural reasoning, respectively. Chapter 6 discusses interreligious worship services in India in which Muslims, along with Jains, are said not to be especially active. In chapter 7 another form of non-discursive interreligious dialogue is covered, namely, dialogue by means of art. Chapter 8 examines the concept of religious hybridity and how it can support a new model for dialogue which the author terms "interstitial theology." Chapters 9, 10, and 11 are socially inclined, dealing with social action, peace building, and female participation, respectively.

Of the chapters in part 2, six of them relate to Islam and Muslims. In chapter 14, "Jewish-Muslim Dialogue," Reuven Firestone explains that there have been continuous discussions between Jews and Muslims since the inception of Islam. To some degree, says Firestone, tension between Judaism and Islam has been inevitable as the two religions have sought to distinguish themselves from each other and to respond to each other. Firestone assesses the situation of Jews under Muslim rule throughout the centuries, explaining the status of Jews as *dhimmī*s, their involvement in the debates of medieval gatherings, and their rise in status in the post-colonial period. Firestone's assessment of the view that Jews did very well under Muslim rule and the view that, conversely, Muslims are inherently unable to treat religious minorities well is that both positions are unsustainable. The truth, says Firestone, lies between the two positions: historically Jews have been treated better under Muslim rule than under Christian rule yet they still suffered intolerance. Firestone pays particular attention to Jewish-Muslim initiatives in Europe and the United States and analyzes them in terms of the differing assimilation of the two communities. Despite identifying areas of mutual concern for Muslims and Jews (living as minorities in the West), Firestone's overall evaluation of Jewish-Muslim dialogue is that it "remains weak and underdeveloped" (p. 238). Firestone is sensitive to the impact of tensions in the Holy Land to community relations as well as to the presence of Jews appearing in the "vanguard of extremist activists who articulate an Islamophobic perspective in their hateful attacks" (p. 236).

All in all, Firestone introduces a delicate topic appropriately, attempting to convey both Jewish and Muslim perspectives without going deeply into the conflicting arguments.

In chapter 15, "Christian-Muslim Dialogue," Daniel Madigan offers a Christian perspective on Christian-Muslim relations, again pointing to the inherent tensions that lie between the Abrahamic religions. Historical theological interactions are outlined in order to provide background for the various theological interactions of the twentieth century. According to Madigan, the twentieth century has seen a profound change in the mode of Christian-Muslim engagement, witnessing expressions of mutual-respect and insight and not just polemical exchanges. Madigan provides insight into how Christians and Muslims typically view one another's positions, occasionally giving advice also. "It is only when we take full account of how extraordinary is the claim we ourselves are making that we are in a position to listen to someone else with an analogous claim" (p. 253). Skepticism is expressed about using the patriarch Abraham as a unifying figurehead and the suggestion is made instead that we seek inspiration in Abraham's speaking out against injustices which are claimed to be God's will. Madigan's discussion is ended with advice to Christians to not fear having humility mistaken for weakness.

Anna Bigelow explains in chapter 17, "Muslim-Hindu Dialogue," how established trade routes between Arabia and India evolved into channels of Hindu-Muslim interaction after the rise of Islam. Al-Biruni is noted as an early non-Indian Muslim scholar who made a serious attempt to understand Indian religion. Richard Eaton is cited as a scholar who has helped to evaluate the extent to which South Asia was Islamicized before the period of British colonial rule. The uniting force of British rule is discussed as is the devastating violence of partition. More recent interfaith interactions and activities are also discussed. Bigelow recognizes many Hindu-Muslim encounters over the century, both positive and negative, and surmises that the term "dialogue" is not completely inappropriate to characterize these encounters.

According to John Azumah (in chapter 19, "Dialogue between Islam and African Religions") the current understanding of how Islam came to be received in Africa requires attention. Just as Christianity cannot be said to have had a dominant position in relation to African religions, neither can Islam. Rather, Islam was accommodated by Africans on their own terms and within the framework of established social structures. Furthermore, it is helpful to distinguish between "normative" and "folk" varieties of Islam so that there is no mistake about how tolerant Islam has been of African religion. While these points are appreciated the author's contribution seems a little too opinionated

for a companion-type anthology. It seems unnecessary, for example, to make a case for normative Islam being anathema to African religion due to an inextricable link between Islam and Arab culture. One can only conclude from the lack of discussion of dialogue that there is in fact no dialogue to write of between the Islamic tradition and African religion but rather tension between the "jihadist reformist" representatives of normative Islam, syncretic Sufis, and Islam-influenced indigenous African movements. Azumah's well-written contribution is worthy of study yet, perhaps, could have benefited from being reined in by the editor, particularly when the terms "*shahada*" and "Wahhabiyya" are left unexplained.

In chapter 22, "Islam and Buddhism," Imtiyaz Yusuf comments that Muslim-Buddhist interaction is now rare, despite a long history of encounter. The Buddha and Muhammad are compared in terms of prophethood and in terms of being founders of religious traditions. The concept of *bodhisattva* is also compared with the concept of *insān al-kāmil*. From the discussion interesting themes emerge which provoke further investigation on the part of the reader. The central theme of suffering (*dukkha*) in Buddhism, for example, finds its counterpart in Islam in the form of *kabad* (Q. 90:4). The comparison at least prompts a Muslim to reflect upon the extent to which this lone Qur'anic word is filled with meaning. Turning to less theoretical matters, Yusuf explores issues in contemporary Buddhist-Muslim dialogue, suggesting that there is a regional variety in the dialogue which reflects changes in factors such as national identity and power relations.

Buddhist-Muslim dialogue is not the only rare form of dialogue explored for William Chittick and Sachiko Murata also explore Muslim-Confucian dialogue in chapter 26, "The Implicit Dialogue of Confucian Muslims." Chittick and Murata identify a number of written efforts to explain Islamic beliefs in Chinese from the mid-sixteenth century CE onwards. As well as authored works there were also translations which are said to throw light on how Chinese Muslims believed it was best to introduce an alien religion to China. The suggestion is that works in theoretical Sufism were translated because they set out the Islamic worldview without jargon, unlike works about creed or law.

The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue provides useful preparatory and background material for the two anthologies edited by Daniel Brown. The communication theory approach to interreligious dialogue, that Brown and colleagues take, is much welcomed for it assumes that effective communication between people of different religious traditions is possible. In other words, Brown et al. assume that there are no theoretical considerations which suggest that effective communication between people of different reli-

gious traditions is impossible or that it need be any more challenging than any other form of dialogue by divided parties. The implication of the approach taken by Brown et al. is that the challenges raised by religious diversity are not insurmountable and there are existing models for understanding the communication challenges faced along with tried and tested proposals for improving dialogue in the religious context.

The thirteen chapters of *A Communication Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue* are organized into three parts: Foundations, Applications, and Challenges. A preface explains a little about the origins of the book and its importance as well as a little about the importance of communication studies, a discipline roughly defined as the study of messages and which overlaps such disciplines as rhetoric, semiotics, cultural studies, media studies, and psychology (p. 4). The types of models employed and discussed in the book include Keaten and Soukup's model of pluralistic interfaith dialogue which is applied by Mark Ward, Sr. (in chapter 2) to Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christian discourse and to Gudykunst's theory of anxiety/uncertainty management in intercultural communications. In "Managing the Anxiety and Uncertainty of Religious Otherness: Interfaith Dialogue as a Problem of Intercultural Communication," Ward argues that effective intercultural communication is possible even if only one party is attentive to their method of communication. Ward recommends that conversant parties forgo the jargon of their own tradition in favor of clearly imparting their message and respecting the limits of each other.

Another example of the type of theory used in *A Communication Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue* is Kenneth Danielson's discussion of an interreligious film screening in chapter 5 ("A Narrative Approach to Interfaith Dialogue: Explanations & Recommendations"). The film which was screened covered Jewish themes and the audience was comprised from a conservative Christian community. The film was followed by an open and informal discussion by one of the co-producers (who was Jewish). Danielson appeals to narrative theory—a theory which builds on Walter R. Fisher's work on narrative and Ernst Bormann's symbolic convergence theory—to explain the successful screening of the film and the perceivable emotional impact on the audience. Danielson suggests that the human attraction to a good story is a forceful power, as demonstrated by the way in which the co-producer captivated his audience through non-rehearsed communication and personal disclosure.

Having discussed a chapter from part 1 and a chapter from part 2, I turn to discussing a chapter from part 3, specifically, chapter 12: "Hindu Interfaith Discourse: Spiral of Silence as a Theological Inevitability." In chapter 12, Ramesh N. Rao and Padma Kuppa note that interreligious dialogue is domi-

nated by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Consequently, Hindus have been unwittingly marginalized from interreligious dialogue activity given that they have a different religious framework and different set of religious issues to the three Abrahamic religions. The Hindu community's acceptance of this marginalization is interpreted by Rao and Kuppa in terms of Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory. The suggestion is that Hindus, as a minority, feel uncomfortable with challenging the norms of interreligious dialogue and select self-censorship instead. Rao and Kuppa's presentation serves as a useful analysis of minority tendencies, albeit one which is not disinterested.

The second edited volume of Brown to be considered here, *Interfaith Dialogue in Practice*, also principally arises out of US experiences of interreligious dialogue. Chapter 3, "Religious Literacy and Epcot Interfaith Dialogue" is a pertinent example. In this chapter Jacob H. Stutzman argues that there is a need for religious literacy in the United States to improve so that the standard of dialogue can also improve. Conceding that some religious education is better than none at all, Stutzman laments that many interreligious encounters work at the same basic level as the tourist-geared Epcot center. The reason suggested for this is that US society is overwhelmingly Christian and that there is consequently little religious curiosity among the population. Stutzman, then, views religious diversity as a motivator for people to find out about not only other religions, but also their own.

In chapter 5, "Deliberative Democracy and Interfaith Dialogue: An Applied Perspective," Paul Fortunato and Diana I. Bowen discuss the experience of running interreligious events under the auspices of the Center for Public Declaration, part of the University of Houston-Downtown. Such events include group and panel discussions and visits. The authors find that initially Muslims are forced on the back foot as they are made to justify or explain their beliefs in light of global events but nonetheless maintain that it is important for Muslims to be able to speak for themselves and have the opportunity to correct any misconceptions. Drawing on Jurgen Habermas' conceptualization of the public sphere, Fortunato and Bowen reach the conclusion that the format of events needs to be carefully considered in the light of its goals. Where the aim is to inform, then more time needs to be allotted to questions and answers. Where the aim is audience participation, then the use of small groups can be more effective. These experiences are a step for the authors to propose a model for public engagement such that university based interreligious events will be able to build trust between different religious communities.

Chapter 6, "Interfaith Dialogue and Higher Education: Challenges and Opportunities," also revolves around the experiences gained from a US university

campus. This time the university is Denison University (Ohio). The authors, Jeffrey B. Kurtz and Mark R. Orten, maintain that critical reflection and faithful practice needs to be prompted by rhetorical conflict and it is only with such conflict that genuine interreligious dialogue is brought about. "Rhetorical rup-tures" is a term coined to refer to just such conflict, that is, to a key point when rhetoric (such as argument, narrative, or performance) introduces healthy ten-sion which can create opportunities for educating and understanding. The au-thors describe the center they established to ensure rhetorical ruptures occur, such as when Muslims require a room for an Eid celebration immediately after a solemn Jewish commemoration of Yom Kippur.

The last chapter to be looked at here is chapter 8, "Bodies at Peace in the Moment of Dialogue" by Kenneth R. Chase which presents the example of Canon Andrew White, an Anglican priest based in Baghdad and who is an active interfaith mediator in the Middle East. White's work is placed into stark contrast with the polite interreligious engagements that might be com-mon in other parts of the world given that his starting point is to seek a ces-sation of killing rather than the establishment of a cordial relationship. The experience of White tells him not only can he not choose his dialogue part-ners in Iraq or in Palestine but also that established conflict resolution strate-gies do not work in the cases he is involved with. Chase presents White as a seasoned and insightful individual from which we can learn. The views of White are given deeper perspective through appeal to Martin Buber (d. 1965), Emmanuel Levinas (d. 1995), and others who have reflected on the nature of dialogue.

Although *Interfaith Dialogue in Practice* is said to arise out of a commu-nication studies approach, this is not to say, especially when compared with Brown's other edited volume, that it is particularly theoretical. While there are elements of communication models and engagement with secondary literature, *Interfaith Dialogue in Practice* is a work which tends toward a series of inter-esting best-practice case studies.

The absence of Muslim names in the contents pages of both of Brown's volumes perhaps tells of a limited range of perspectives, particularly given that Jewish and Christian perspectives certainly are represented by respective ad-herents of those traditions. This is less of an issue with *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue* where some of the chapters on Mus-lims are actually written by Muslims. Another observation in this vein is that all three of the works discussed are dominated by contributors from the western academe. While understandable, given the topic at hand one would hope that future works manage to have a diverse range of contributors.

Each of the three publications which have been reviewed make a unique contribution to the extant literature on interreligious dialogue. In *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue* it is the choice and range of topics covered which is novel whereas in *A Communication Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue* and *Interfaith Dialogue in Practice* it is the theoretical grounding and way of thinking about best practice, respectively, which is novel. *Interfaith Dialogue in Practice* is likely to have the broadest appeal, being most accessible, followed by *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue* and then *A Communication Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue* which is suited to communication studies specialists. Each of these texts will reward study and will be worthy additions to libraries and subject reading lists.

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