

World Religions in Dialogue: A Comparative Theological Approach. Edited by Pim Valkenberg. Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2013. Pp. 278. \$45.95.

In our world plagued by fundamentalisms and animosity within and against religious communities, interfaith dialogue assumes great importance. Although so much is written in the field of interfaith dialogue, not all such endeavors ensure that the religious other is understood as “other.” The result is that the other ends up being described as a diminutive and distorted projection of one’s own prejudiced perceptions. The volume strives to remedy this misperception by using a comparative theological approach to bring “insiders” as well as “outsiders” to the dialogue table. The “outsider” is always a Christian scholar who has been experientially engaged in interreligious dialogue for some time, while the “insiders” are scholars and practicing believers of four major world religions: Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

The volume is aimed at instructing a predominantly Christian readership of North America and Europe that is faced with encountering other, largely minority religious communities. The Christian insider-scholar exposes his or her viewpoint with the caution, respect, and sensitivity demanded by such a delicate exercise. Each of the four parts dealing with the above-mentioned four religions begins with a chapter giving an “outsider’s perspective” followed by a chapter giving an “insider’s perspective.” Although the outsider’s perspective is scholarly and fairly comprehensive, the insider brings more depth and insight into the religion she or he has been practicing. The third chapter in each part presents religious texts and commentaries from both dialogue partners; and this climaxes with “Concluding Reflections” that bring to the reader’s attention the fruits of the dialogue accomplished by mutual listening and sharing of knowledge and experiences.

Diverse voices and viewpoints give the invigorating impression of being nourished. “Outsiders” do well to question stereotypes of the religious histories and worldviews other than those of Christianity, which many Westerners tend to uncritically accept as true. Likewise, the “insiders” heighten awareness of the hidden treasures of their own religious traditions. The “Concluding Reflections” enriches this dialogical enterprise, tying up loose ends and indicating future uncharted paths for conversation. The review questions, points for reflection and discussion, glossary, annotated bibliography, and list of available Internet resources encourage further study and research of the four religions discussed.

Eastern readers, who are mostly a “Christian minority” and regularly encounter numerous believers of other religions, might find some sections of the book repetitive. Western readers interested in learning more about the world’s major religions will find much material that can deepen their interfaith experiences. Scholars and professors committed to interreligious dialogue as a way of life will also find much here that can be communicated to their students—encouraging them to take off their sandals as they tread the sacred pathways of interfaith dialogue.

Francis Gonsalves, S.J.
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