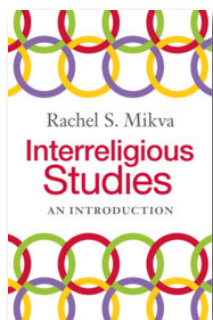


BOOK REVIEW

Interreligious Studies: An Introduction. By Rachel S. Mikva.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. xi+356 pages. \$105.00
(hardcover); \$34.99 (paperback); \$34.99 (eBook). ISBN 9781108826600.



Rachel Mikva's introductory text to the field of Interreligious Studies is much needed by those who are teaching in this relatively new subfield of the academic study of religion. This work is particularly well suited for undergraduate classes, as Mikva writes in a clear and accessible way, rendering complex material comprehensible to students with no prior knowledge of religion or of the history of interreligious engagement. This text can serve as the foundational text for an introductory course in Interreligious Studies, providing as it does a thematic outline that supports a comprehensive, semester-long introductory course.

Mikva begins by offering a working definition of Interreligious Studies: "The field of Interreligious Studies (IRS) entails critical analysis of the dynamic encounters—historical and contemporary, intentional and unintentional, embodied and imagined, congenial and conflictual—of individuals and communities who orient around religion differently. It investigates the complex of personal, interpersonal, institutional, and societal implications" (6). She then summarizes the defining characteristics of the discipline within the study of religion: it is interdisciplinary, inclusive, intersectional, and relational. IRS is not simply an objective study of different religions or belief systems but rather the study of how people who live, practice and engage in different religions or spiritual traditions interact with one another in the real world. She uses the term *lifestance* throughout the work to be inclusive of the enormous variety of religious and spiritual practices and traditions that make up our religiously pluralistic world.

The work is divided into three sections. Part I, “Mapping the Field,” covers the initial work of defining the field in chapter 1, and then moves on to explore the “Challenges in Naming and Navigating Religious Difference” in chapter 2. This is followed by a brief but thorough history of interreligious studies and engagement in chapter 3, and culminates in a brilliant chapter, “Ethical, Philosophical, and Theological Grounds of Parity Pluralism” in which she synthesizes the many different theological approaches to religious pluralism that have emerged as theologians, philosophers, and religious experts have wrestled with the manyness of religions in the world, struggling to understand and make meaning out of all the differences that exist. Mikva coins the term “parity pluralism,” wherein *parity*, she explains, “denotes comparable merit—not sameness: multiple lifestances are deemed equally sufficient and their variety is beneficial” (67). This chapter is particularly helpful for students with no theological training.

Mikva takes a vast library of work spanning many decades and distills it into a comprehensible synthesis of complex, and at times, confusing theological thinking. She starts with ethical arguments, moves to philosophical grounds and then to theological and scriptural arguments for parity, and concludes with a section on the challenges and critiques of parity pluralism and a simple case study. She begins this section with this ethical foundation: “...parity pluralism seeks to accord respect to other human beings *and* affirm their spiritual choices. It maintains that we should see our lifestance as contributing to the world’s store of sacred wisdom rather than owning it, counting among the world’s faiths rather than triumphing over them. Encounter with difference is a call to learn, not a conflict to be resolved” (70).

In Part II of the book, Mikva examines the many spaces and places where interreligious engagement and encounter happen, noting up front that “[e]ncounters with religious difference are everywhere, by accident and by design” (95). In chapter 5, she focuses on four main areas of encounter: family, congregations, college campuses, and the workplace. That chapter includes plenty of real-life examples of such encounters, taken from published case studies and from litigation regarding workplace discrimination.

Chapter 6 includes an examination of interreligious encounter in the media, including newspapers, television, film, radio, museums, advertising, websites, podcasts, social media networks, and the like. She analyzes the subtle and not so subtle ways in which various forms of media portray religion generally and religious difference in particular, offering case studies

from widely divergent contexts, from Nollywood films in Nigeria, to news coverage of a political campaign in Switzerland, to the online media platforms Patheos and BeliefNet.

Chapter 7 examines religion in the public square. This section includes case studies on how the “free exercise” and “establishment” clauses of the First Amendment have been interpreted in the American context, offering case studies on issues like nativity scenes in public places, and the Hobby Lobby case in which a corporation was determined to have a right to the “free exercise” of religion, the controversy over prayer in public schools and how public schools can teach about religion while staying within constitutional boundaries.

Chapter 8 is particularly important given the controversies that have roiled college campuses recently with respect to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Mikva summarizes the history of antisemitism and of Islamophobia, providing just enough context to help readers understand the current iterations of those prejudices, the controversies erupting around them, and the complexity involved in evaluating whether something that has occurred rises to the level of antisemitism or Islamophobia or not.

In Part III, Mikva looks at various modes of interreligious engagement. She examines “orchestrated projects to cultivate relationship and understanding among people with differing lifestances, using various modalities” (211). Each chapter of this section looks at a particular form of interreligious engagement, including (a) dialogue, (b) study and spiritual encounter, (c) community-based service, organizing, and advocacy, and (d) the arts. Mikva summarizes the four modes of encounter that have been foundational in interreligious encounter for decades, based upon a framework articulated in 1984 by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, as follows:

- *Dialogue of life*, describing our efforts to live in an open and neighborly spirit as we meet one another in the world;
- *Dialogue of action*, in which people of diverse lifestances collaborate for the development and liberation of all;
- *Dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists share their religious heritages, coming to appreciate each other’s spiritual values and enrich perspective on their own;

- *Dialogue of religious experience*, where persons of faith share their spiritual riches as they relate to prayer, contemplation, and other aspects of their experience (211).

Mikva also offers another framework known as the “dialogue of head, heart and hands” (212). She delves into the rationales and core practices of these frameworks, offering the reader a succinct survey of values that have emerged over decades of engagement, including a commitment to deep listening, a posture of curiosity about the religious/spiritual “other,” mutual respect in speech and action, speaking *from* a lifespance not *for* it, equality among all participants, accountability, and a commitment to hospitality.

The final chapter of the book, on Conflict Transformation, recognizes that not all lifespance engagement is positive and that those who engage in this work need tools with which to manage those encounters that are challenging and conflictual. “Focused on skill-building rather than program design and facilitation,” Mikva explains, this chapter “introduces intercultural intelligence, narrative mediation, interest-based bargaining, and non-violent communication. Effective leadership requires self-awareness about our instinctive responses to conflict, so the chapter also presents the Thomas-Kilmann paradigm to help readers explore their reactions” (299).

To summarize, this book is a wonderful addition to the field of Interreligious Studies. It offers a comprehensive introduction to both the academic field and the lived practice of engagement across lines of difference.

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