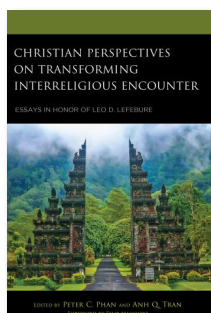


## BOOK REVIEW

***Christian Perspectives on Transforming Interreligious Encounter: Essays in Honor of Leo D. Lefebure.*** Edited by Peter C. Phan and Anh Q. Tran. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2024. xxviii + 350 pp. \$130.00 (hardback). ISBN: 978-1-66695-998-7.



A *Festschrift*, “designed as a textbook” intended for college courses “on the sacred writings of various religions and how Christian beliefs can be expressed anew as a result from learning from them” (xxi), is a fitting and brilliant tribute to Leo Lefebure. Lefebure, a professor and Matteo Ricci, S.J., Chair of Theology at Georgetown University, has spent his successful career as an impactful writer, teacher, global speaker, and priest transforming how Christians can learn and grow through engaging and partnering with non-Christians.

His oeuvre testifies to why such interfaith encounters and engagements are both necessary and cathartic. His expertise in specific interfaith dialogues (Buddhist-Christian and Jewish-Christian, in particular), interdisciplinary and wide-ranging theological acumen, and scholarly and spiritual focus on the gifts and role of the Holy Spirit within and beyond the Catholic Church, render his legacy and work of tremendous benefit to those beginning their theological journey and those of us further along on the life-learning gradient.

To their credit, editors Peter C. Phan and Anh Q. Tran have organized and structured this *Festschrift*/textbook across diverse theological fields, including comparative theology, interreligious studies, interreligious dialogue, moral theology, biblical theology, and systematics. After a Foreword by Archbishop Felix Machado, a poem by Leo’s brother Stephen Lefebure, and a comprehensive introduction by Phan and Tran, the work proceeds in three parts. Part I, “Ways of Encountering the Religious Other,” consists of nine chapters, principally focusing on a Christian’s textual and personal encounters with other faith traditions and practitioners, including Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Confucianism, and Hinduism. Building on these insights,

Part II comprises seven chapters that seek to outline or establish how “key Christian doctrines have been or should be reformulated” after these interreligious encounters (xxiv). Part III includes Phan’s moving tribute to his friend and Georgetown colleague and Lefebure’s words of appreciation for the book’s contributors. In this review I focus on several chapters I found particularly inviting and powerful.

In Jewish-Christian dialogue and Christian readings of Jewish Scriptures, essays by stalwarts John T. Pawlikowki (which opens Part I) and Mary C. Boys (chapter 4) expertly and concisely present the historical, present, and future trajectory of post-*Nostra Aetate* Catholic understanding and dialogue with Judaism. Regarding present advances and insights from Jewish-Christian dialogue and research, Boys’ warning that there “is a serious gap between scholars and church leaders, especially clergy” (91), should be heeded.

In chapter 2, Kristin Johnston Largen presents a helpful overview and commentary of the great Hindu text, the *Bhagavad Gita*, for a Christian reader. If she had more space, I would have liked to hear more about the ethical problems regarding the literal violence espoused for Arjuna in the *Gita* and the problem of divorcing intentions and results when it comes to others. In chapter 3, James L. Fredericks compares the role and purpose of loneliness in Dorothy Day’s *The Long Loneliness* with the story of Paṭacārā, a Buddhist nun. Day’s and Paṭacārā’s stories are both inspiring—inspiring in Day’s case for her utter devotion to the poor and in Paṭacārā’s acceptance of her suffering—but also frustrating for their rigidity and acceptance of doctrinal blind spots within Catholic and Buddhist tradition. Regardless, both women leave me feeling ashamed, silenced, and humbled at my own failures in comparison to any of theirs.

In chapter 4, Thierry Meynard analyzes four examples of Jesuit missionaries reading the Confucian Classics between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. He highlights the variety of Christian readings that often depended on cultural and political contexts and offers warnings and suggestions amidst the very different context of Confucianism and Christianity today in China. For Meynard, the classics of any religious tradition are universal sources and texts that should not be controlled or politicized by any group or country. “Concrete encounter through classical texts” (73), especially through interpreting symbols and the use of reason, can point a way beyond political walls and religious superiority claims.

Two stellar chapters are included on Islam. Jason Welle first convincingly argues that the Christian encounter with the Qur’an should be characterized

by “a willingness to allow careful listening to the Qur’an to grant Christians new insights about how God has renewed all things in Christ” (97). While cognizant of the theological and textual challenges the Qur’an poses for Christians, Welle is right to highlight how the Qur’an “serves as a beneficial ‘irritation’ to Christian theology in a pluralistic word” (112). Klaus von Stoch, moreover, turns to Lefebure’s theology of Judaism and Islam and asks the question: “Can Christians learn from Qur’anic Christology?” (117). Ultimately, he contends that Qur’anic Christology can aid Christians in opposing any use of Christology for militaristic or imperial aims, but two insights really captivated me (129). The first is how Stoch argues that the Qur’an “renounces all forms of supersessionism” (125), while his other claim had me writing “wow” in the margins: “There is a way of reading the Qur’anic claims on Jesus Christ without contradicting the Christian faith” (129). This path, according to Stoch, is possible through turning to contemporary Muslim scholarship in Germany (especially Zishan Ghaffar and Vahid Mahdavi Mehr) and through Lefebure’s “scriptural hermeneutics of hospitality” (129).

Turning to Part II, Dale T. Irvin’s “The Holy Spirit of Truth and Grace” and Marc A. Pugliese’s “Communities of Faith and Salvation” awed me by their encyclopaedic knowledge of a number of worldviews/world religions in such a limited space. Irvin’s essay shows how Lefebure’s humble and hospitable readings of other faith traditions testify to the universal love of God and the grace, truth, and wisdom of the Spirit operating within and beyond the Church. Irvin writes: “Grace is thus manifested primarily as love, as connection, as communion” (234). I also appreciated Debora Tonelli’s argument that the contributions of African Biblical Studies to decolonial theology, despite the violence Europeans unleashed (and still unleash) in Africa, are sources of renewal both within and outside Africa. In Erin Lothes’ “The Buddha, the Christ, and the Amazonian Chief,” I was especially moved by her highlighting of “the cosmic common good” (through her reading of Daniel Scheid). As she writes: “Honoring this sacred dimension of the cosmos unites Catholic spirituality and Amazonian lifeways” (316). It is a fitting idea for the ethical, dialogical, and global thrust behind Lefebure’s work as well.

In Part III, Peter Phan aptly titles Lefebure as “the wise man from the west,” and a *Pontifex* bridgebuilder of East and West. The book ends with Lefebure’s words of appreciation and commentary on the essays. In closing let me add that this book is worthy of the spirit, vitality, and inclusivity of Leo. It works, as intended, both as a *Festschrift* and textbook, opening students

to the richness of interreligious encounter as transformation and a blueprint for the renewal and future of Christian theology.

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