

BOOK REVIEW

Sacred Snaps: Photovoice for Interfaith Engagement.

By Roman R. Williams, Catherine Holtmann, and William L. Sachs.
Routledge, 2024. xv + 193 pp. ISBN 978-1-032-85664-3. \$49.99
(paperback).



In *Sacred Snaps: Photovoice for Interfaith Engagement*, Roman R. Williams, Catherine Holtmann, and William L. Sachs introduce an innovative model for interreligious engagement by adapting photovoice, a community-based participatory research method, for use in interreligious settings. The case studies in the book focus on their own work in Christian-Muslim dialogue, though they describe the method as transferable to other traditions. They ground their approach in lived religion, visual sociology, and interfaith engagement and show how photography can open new channels of understanding across cultural and religious boundaries. In this approach, participants respond to guiding questions with their own photographs, discuss them in facilitated groups, and often curate them into public exhibits that invite wider awareness and engagement.

The authors point out that, in interfaith work, overcoming misconceptions requires more than the transfer of accurate information; it also demands cultivating empathetic understanding. Yet even adding empathy cannot always surmount deeper obstacles to dialogue. For example, power asymmetries often privilege majority traditions and marginalize minority voices. Without careful facilitation, dialogue can simply mirror these inequities. Theological exclusivism can also present a challenge, for while it is not incompatible with dialogue, it can narrow its scope by presuming one tradition is the sole bearer of truth, and thus limit openness to a genuine and mutual exchange of ideas. Additionally, ongoing geopolitical crises such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have only heightened interreligious tensions. These challenges and more underscore the urgency of utilizing creative and participatory practices that engage the affective and relational dimensions of interfaith encounter.

It is within this context that *Sacred Snaps* offers a distinctive and beneficial approach. By prioritizing lived experience over theological/religious doctrine, photovoice circumvents many of the initial barriers to engagement and trust. Misunderstandings are less likely to arise from contested ideological or tradition-specific viewpoints when participants first meet one another through the images they create and where they share the stories and perspectives that give those images meaning. The method is inherently egalitarian: its utilization of widely available smartphone technology democratizes participation and mitigates some of the power imbalances and other challenges that can be present in more formal interfaith settings.

In the introduction and early chapters, the authors explicitly situate their work within the domains of visual sociology (as participatory and image-based research), the study of lived religion (religion in everyday practice), and interfaith engagement (shifting from theological/ideological debate to story-grounded encounters). From visual sociology, the authors draw on the notion that photographs are not merely illustrations but meaning-bearing texts that are capable of revealing aspects of everyday life and shaping the ways participants see and engage one another. From the study of lived religion, they note that religious identity and practice are embedded not solely within institutional frameworks but also in everyday habits, relationships, and tangible expressions of faith. From interfaith engagement, they seek to build constructive relationships across religious differences and shift the dialogue away from abstract theological discourse toward that of personal story.

The volume's methodology could be interpreted through what might be called visual hospitality. Paul Ricoeur introduced the notion of linguistic hospitality in his reflections on translation, a concept that has been taken up by a range of scholars. Marianne Moyaert, in particular, has extended the metaphor in her articulation of ritual hospitality within interreligious encounter.¹ For Moyaert, ritual hospitality is not generic "interfaith prayer"

1 The phrase "visual hospitality" is explored across several bodies of literature that examine how visual practices can mediate ethical, relational, and hospitable forms of encounter, though the term itself is not consistently used. Paul Ricoeur develops the notion of linguistic hospitality in his reflections on translation, particularly in *On Translation* (trans. Eileen Brennan [Routledge, 2006], where translation is understood as an ethical openness to the other. Marianne Moyaert extends this metaphor in the context of interreligious encounter through her concept of "ritual hospitality." See *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue: Boundaries, Transgressions, and Innovations* (Bloomsbury, 2015), 1–16. For more on how Ricoeur's hermeneutics of translation has been adapted for work in comparative theology by Moyaert, see Peter Ward Youngblood, "Interfaith Chaplaincy as Interpretive Hospitality" *Religions* 10, no. 3 (2019): 1–14.

or a newly invented, neutral ceremony. Rather, it involves hosting or receiving religious others within the ritual space of a living tradition, under that tradition's own rules, symbols, and rhythms. Because ritual is embodied and performative, such hospitality engages participants at an affective and sensory level and carries the potential to shape perception, identity, and relationship through shared participation rather than discursive exchange alone. Photovoice reflects this understanding of hospitality by shifting it into the visual realm where participants disclose their worlds through images, and dialogue unfolds naturally through both what is shown and the trust that is created in their sharing.

Perhaps the book's strongest contributions emerge in its case studies, where participant photographs and the dialogues they sparked bring the method to life: a picture of a bouquet of flowers prompted reflections by a Christian and a Muslim on the divine as reflected in nature (51–52); an image of Muslim prayer evoked “holy envy” in a Christian participant even as it stirred fear for her son's safety in a Muslim mother (76); and a mural of Martin Luther King, Jr., paired with the quote “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter,” prompted dialogue on social inequality and the collective responsibility for justice (95). Such examples show how photovoice can generate narratives that can be both tradition-specific and resonant across traditions. The process does not erase differences. Participants encounter theological and cultural diversity, sometimes in relation to global conflicts, yet situated in personal narratives that tend to ease defensiveness and foster receptivity. Public exhibitions that typically conclude each cycle extend the dialogue into civic spaces, where they can provide a counter-narrative to media portrayals of engagement that emphasize conflict rather than cooperation.

Notwithstanding its merits, the volume raises questions that warrant further consideration. The authors describe their recruitment process and note that some participants were already active in interfaith networks, others were drawn by the novelty of photography, and that hesitant individuals often excused themselves by saying they were “not photographers.” While this candid approach is helpful, it leaves open the question of whether the method can extend beyond such self-selecting groups. As with many interfaith initiatives, those who participate are often already predisposed toward engagement, which raises the challenge of how photovoice might reach more resistant or polarized groups.

Second, while the interpretive process is central to photovoice and the volume offers rich examples of how images invite dialogue across traditions, the analysis could be pushed further. Facilitation, group dynamics,

and the cultural-theological frameworks that participants bring all shape interpretation, and those moments when an image carries conflicting ideas across traditions can present particular challenges. The book emphasizes the constructive outcomes of these exchanges, but it offers less sustained reflection on how conflicting readings were (or might be) negotiated in practice. Attending more closely to such tensions would enrich the analysis and point toward a promising area for further research.

Third, the case studies provide rich insight into Christian-Muslim engagement, which forms the primary focus of the projects in the book. The authors gesture toward broader religious diversity in North America and include some secular voices, yet examples involving Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Indigenous, secular, and other participants are absent. This focus does not diminish the value of the work but does highlight a promising avenue for future application. Expanding photovoice beyond Christian-Muslim dialogue would test the method's adaptability across a wider spectrum of interreligious encounters.

These caveats aside, *Sacred Snaps* makes a significant contribution to both the scholarship and practice of interreligious dialogue. It models an approach that is accessible, participatory, and attentive to the dynamics of trust-building. In a time of division and polarization, it reminds us that transformative engagement need not begin with formal doctrinal/ideological discussions or debates but can emerge from an image, a story, and the courage to listen and share. For scholars, it opens new avenues of research and new pathways for exploring visual hermeneutics, the dynamics of meaning-making in interreligious contexts, and the contributions of participatory methodologies in the study of religion. For practitioners, it offers an adaptable framework for reimagining dialogue around the sacred dimensions of everyday life. And for communities negotiating religious diversity in fraught times, it provides inspiration, empathy, wisdom, and a practical path toward reconciliation.

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