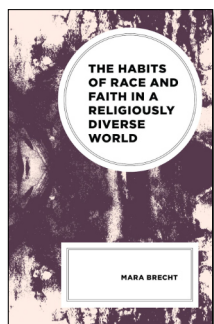


BOOK REVIEW

The Habits of Race and Faith in a Religiously Diverse World. By Mara Brecht. Lexington Books, 2026. xi + 223 pp.
ISBN: 978-1-4985-5905-8. \$80.50 (hardcover); \$72.45 (ebook).



Brecht has, with this book, tackled an important issue, bringing together the question of theologies of race and theologies of religion, looking at how whiteness often constitutes a norm in the Christian experience. There is much to commend in the book, however, given what a review must do, I also have the regrettable task of outlining the various ways in which this text falls short. First, though, let me outline the book and the author's intent.

The book has 13 chapters spread over 3 parts. The first part, "Interreligious Encounter and Ways of Being Human," takes on the question of how humans, specifically Christians, meet and relate to those of other religions, while also giving an overview of the theory of habits of both Aristotle and Dewey. These may seem disparate topics, but Brecht usefully makes the case that habits form how we behave and experience the world, which includes in our encounters with otherness, and she draws this latter thread through the book. The second part, "A Deep Dive into Whiteness," looks at how our experience of the world is racialized, and in particular how Christianity has very often been directly connected to race, or rather has privileged white people and their experiences. The third part, "Theologies of Interreligious Encounter," looks at the theology of religions and liberation theologies, arguing that theologies either foreground race and liberation or religious diversity but can't seem to do both, and then trying to offer her own way through.

Three notes on Brecht's seeming intentions are also useful. First, she states upfront that this work comes from her Catholic context, and it mainly

foregrounds Catholic theologians and experiences, so will be less relevant to others, but she goes beyond this in ways that others can still relate to. Second, she takes a focus on the US context, it is only a long way into the book that she actually states this focus, but the US-centrism had become apparent long before (81 at the outset of chapter 6). For US readers this may be assumed as normative (a privilege of which most US scholars are often unaware) and much here has wider relevance; however, it leads to some issues I will address below. Third, the writing style seems generally aimed at undergraduates, and she opens by saying that she's tried to write the whole book in her "authentic teaching voice," with the thirteen-chapter pattern suggesting this could be used as a coursebook across a term/semester (ix).

Turning to my critiques, I'll start first with this as a textbook. The writing style and level are very uneven. Some chapters read like they're designed for first-year students, with really basic concepts and simple language; if one is not this target audience, then it may feel as though one is being talked down to. However, elsewhere the language and concepts are denser, as if aimed at upper-level undergraduates and even graduate students. This is especially so when she engages the theological material, but there are figures discussed who are probably not familiar even to many undergraduate theology students. There are also places where she seems to be directly addressing her fellow scholars and educators, saying something works for her and making asides about pedagogy and other issues. Certainly, one can address students about one's teaching choices; I do this regularly. However, what I see here doesn't read like how you would talk to students about this. Therefore, I don't see how the book as a whole could be used as a textbook, though some chapters could certainly and usefully stand alone as class readings.

A second issue is that there are a few inaccuracies, misinterpretations, and oversimplifications. Brecht, for instance, claims that racism began with Kant. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that this is a historically inaccurate claim. Certainly, some texts make this claim, but an engagement with the literature on the history of race, racialization, and the racialization of religion will disavow one of such an idea very quickly (see, e.g., Francisco Bethencourt's *Racisms: From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century* or Marianne Moyaert's *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other: A History of Religionization*). I don't get a sense of deep engagement with that literature here, even if Brecht is likely familiar with it. It indeed has a "great men" approach, as if one or two individuals developed these ideas with no relation to the social, political, and economic realities. (Understanding race without a focus on economics misses key elements of racialization). As a further note on the literature base, many discussions in chapters often seem to rely heavily on

only one or two books, especially older ones. This can lead to dated conversations that lack nuance. For instance, in discussing the concept of “religion,” Brecht mainly uses Masuzawa’s 2005 classic *Inventing World Religions*, and Nongbri’s 2013 *Before Religion*.¹ Both are excellent books, but debates have moved on. For a 2024 text, it is striking how much literature is at least one or two decades old, and often much older (whole sections rely on 1980s and 1990s texts). Certainly, many classic texts have stood the test of time, but this approach outlines older classics and does not look at the current state of the field. As a note, Brecht cites a 2017 text for evidence that Facebook is the biggest social media platform in the world, and one can only imagine students rolling their eyes when they hear their professors telling them that their parent’s platform is the biggest thing (51–52). I could continue but these examples suffice.

Brecht’s American-centric focus also causes problems because she says there seems no way to bring together the tension between liberation theologies and theologies of religions. But Asian (and Catholic) liberation theologians, such as Aloysius Pieris have well established discussions on this.²

If I focus on criticisms, I don’t deny much good material. While her discussion of race and the more sociological theories come off as superficial and sporadic, she is much sounder on the theological discussions. This may be a function of her primary training in theology. She is, to my mind, right on the money in stressing how significant Rahner is for *Nostra Aetate*, and the wider texts of the Second Vatican Council. She seems to offer an implied pushback against a growing literature that contests Rahner’s significance for *Nostra Aetate*, even if Brecht does not explicitly name this literature. On the one hand, as an intro or survey-level text, perhaps we can forgive Brecht’s lack of engagement with more recent literature. On the other, other parts of her book offer rather complex and detailed discussions; this makes the book unbalanced on occasions.

In conclusion, there’s a lot that I like about this book. Some discussions are really excellent, and I could imagine myself giving sections to students. At the same time, my copy of the book is marked in a number of places with crosses in the margins and “Nos” when I come across the inaccuracies. The book would have to be paired with other sources offering critical

1 Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (University of Chicago Press, 2005) and Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (Yale University Press, 2015).

2 See, for example, Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (Orbis, 1988).

supplemental material. Having really enjoyed, learned from, and often gone back to some of Brecht's other work, I find myself surprisingly underwhelmed by this one, even while it offers some helpful sections.

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