

Encounters: The Art of Interfaith Dialogue. Nicola Green, art and concept; Aaron Rosen, editor. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2018. 176 pp. ISBN: 9782503580326. \$107.61 hardcover.

From September 17 through November 19, 2018, *Encounters*—an exhibition mounted in the Crypt at St Martin-in-the-Fields, London—showcased the most recent offerings of visual artist and social historian Nicola Green. These artworks were the result of a decade-long endeavor undertaken by Green. This project began in early 2008, when Green wangled her way into a private meeting at Lambeth Palace (London) between the Dalai Lama and the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams (16). She would be the only other person in the room as they conversed. There would be no audio recording. She would simply photograph and sketch (17). Apparently pleased with the outcome, Williams went on to invite Green to subsequent meetings he had with major religious leaders. In some cases, this led to opportunities to shadow these leaders on other visits (18). Thus, between 2008 and 2018 from her base in the United Kingdom, Green took twenty-two trips to a wide variety of destinations, including Bangalore, the West Bank, Cairo, the Galilee, Assisi, Jerusalem, the Vatican, Doha, Tokyo, Amritsar, and the United States in order to document interfaith meetings involving high-ranking spiritual leaders. Many were one-on-one conversations; a few were larger in scale. One, for example, involved some 30 Christian and Muslim participants; another had 289 attendees representing fourteen religions. During each meeting Green took copious notes, made numerous drawings, and took hundreds of photographs (nearly 10,000 in total)—all of which provides the foundation for the two provocative series of visual artworks of the *Encounters* exhibition.

Green's *Light Series* comprises twelve life-sized figures of major religious leaders created on solid transparent plastic made of polymethyl methacrylate through a process that involves both silk-screening and hand-painting with a result that is reminiscent of reverse painting on glass. The materials used ensure that the figures glow—thus imparting hopefulness—without need for special lighting. Green's *Encounter Series*, which is informed by her training and practice as a portrait artist, consists of thirty-two formal portraits of religious leaders. Each portrait measures fifty-two centimeters by forty centimeters (approximately twenty inches by sixteen inches). In every case, the subject's face and hands are obscured—rendered without features in one of several shades of muted brown. However, each portrait contains a background drawing upon symbols or elements representative of the subject's religion. Furthermore, several subjects are readily recognizable because of their distinctive hair or clothing. Green sees this series as continuing her “exploration of identity, particularly understanding difference through the lens of gender, heritage, culture, religion, race, leadership, and power” (16). For the fall 2018 exhibition, the twelve life-sized figures were arranged such that they seem to be in conversation with each other. The viewer may interact with each individually or with the group as a whole. Nearby, thirty of the portraits were arranged on a single wall in three rows of ten—a display approximately fourteen feet by five-and-a-half feet.

It is typical for an art exhibition to be accompanied by a catalogue providing helpful information about the artists and works on display—and this exhibition did indeed have such a booklet. However, in this case, on offer as well was *Encounters: The Art of Interfaith Dialogue*, conceived by the artist herself and well edited by Aaron Rosen—a book of another genre entirely. This volume is large, beautifully laid out, printed on heavy stock, and laden with color prints. The book serves to expand the reader's view of Green's project, since the text is punctuated with an interesting selection of black-and-white sketches she made during the interfaith meetings she documented, some individual candid photos, several photo collages, and close-ups of elements of

the portrait backgrounds. All items in the *Encounters* exhibition are also included in the book. The portraits of *The Encounter Series* are, in fact, put to interesting use (two or more at a time) as separators between one essay and the next.

This book might best be characterized as performing an exegetical function: its text, comprising fourteen essays by a multidisciplinary roster of authors, aims to help the reader understand the significance of Green's project. The Foreword, supplied by Rowan Williams, commends Green's "unusually full and varied experience of reflecting through her art on people who are associated with power of one kind or another" and expresses gratitude for an "ensemble of images" with the capacity to encourage the viewer to appreciate symbolism and authority afresh (7, 8). In the Preface, Jonathan Sacks, Emeritus Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations, explains Green's rationale for her project—in which he, like Williams, is among its subjects: her desire "to witness faith and gain insight into how we understand, respect and defend other religions without compromising the absolute truth of our own" (13). These two pieces are followed by a brief essay that is, in effect, Green's own preface to the volume. In it, she explains that a decade of documenting interfaith meetings had confirmed for her that something new and not widely reported was on the rise: religious leaders the world around were making individual efforts to arrange opportunities to meet one-on-one "to discuss their differences and commonalities and to develop respect for one another, moving away from superficial tolerance towards a deep understanding of other viewpoints" (16). In both the series and the exhibition, thus in this volume as well, her aim, she explains, is "to present this new departure in interfaith dialogue [i.e., major leaders seeking out each other's company for one-on-one meetings] and explore what it could mean for society and the future" (20).

In their formal introduction to the volume, academic advisors Aaron Rosen and Ben Quash reiterate Green's thesis that, in the twenty-first century, "we have entered a new era in interreligious relations" (25). Because of the "extraordinary access to leader figures" Green gained, she has been able, they assert, to document "the depth of relationships being formed across historically deep divides" by quite a range of major religious leaders—and their willingness "to sit down together and consider possibilities for cooperation, dialogue, and friendship, in which they actively articulate their respect for other faiths without compromising the truth of their own tradition" (26).

Here follow ten analytical essays, which vary in length from five to twelve pages—with comparisons in word count affected considerably by the number and sizes of illustrations interspersed. All are worth reading, and although editor Rosen clearly had a rhythm in mind when setting the order in which they are presented, they can be read beneficially in any order.

Of these ten pieces, the most conversational in tone is an autobiographical piece ("Beyond Photo Opportunities: A Personal Journey into Interfaith Dialogue") by Ibrahim Mogra—a Muslim scholar who is well known in the United Kingdom as an activist and bridge builder—in which he stresses repeatedly the transformative potential of candid photos of religious leaders enjoying each other's company. This is followed by David F. Ford's "Through Scripture and through Prayer: Leading Edges in Interfaith Engagement." Ford writes as a participant in the 2011 convening of the Building Bridges Seminar—one of the mid-size interfaith events Green documented for this project and one in which Mogra participated as well. But in reflecting on scripture study and prayer as related practices that "play very different [yet valuable] roles in interfaith relations," (55) Ford

writes in equal part as a founder of Scriptural Reasoning (SR), another method of deep interfaith engagement to which the Building Bridges Seminar is often compared.

In the lengthiest of these essays, “Grace-full Bodies: Interreligious Encounters in the Art of Nicola Green,” William J. Danaher, Jr. exegetes three of Green’s photos—the first capturing then Archbishop Rowan Williams and the Dalai Lama seated together on a sofa, clasping each other’s hands; the second, depicting Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks presenting a copy of his fresh English translation of the Koren Siddur (a widely used authorized guide to Jewish worship) to Pope Benedict XVI; the third portraying Rowan Williams in Bangalore, greeting Shri Sugunendra Theertha Swamiji of Shri Purthige Matha (a major monastery) with hands flat together, fingers pointed upward, in a gesture that evokes simultaneously the Hindu *namaskara* and the Christian *immixtio manuum* gestures.

We must pause for a moment to acknowledge that all twelve subjects of Green’s *Light Series* are men; of the thirty-two portraits of *The Encounter Series*, only one is a woman. The scarcity of women’s presence as participants in interfaith meetings generally is noted by Maryanne Saunders in her essay, “Women as Witness: Gender and Participation in *Encounters*,” in which she explores in depth the uniqueness and implications of Green’s own presence as a female documentarian/photographer in some two dozen interfaith meetings. Saunders describes Green as one who herself is behind the lens, “outside the frame,” striving for invisibility, yet—because she is a woman—having an impact on these meetings, nevertheless.

Lieke Wijnia, in “Framing Encounters, Performing Difference,” helps the reader understand how Green’s documentation of interfaith encounters is both informed by, and has influence on, the physicality of the settings in which the meetings occurred. Specifically, Wijnia considers the ongoing negotiation of self-presentation in which participants cannot help but engage; the ways in which performance of ritual or handling of ritual objects or limiting oneself to the role of spectator may be factors in interfaith encounter; and the multifaceted archival and transformative role of Green’s project.

Two essays—Chloë Reddaway’s “Holy Faces: Reflection and Projection” and Dua Abbas’s “‘Only Connect’: Drawing Interfaith Parallels through Art”—situate Green’s two series of depictions of present-day religious leaders—particularly, the blank-faced *Encounter Series*—within centuries-long Christian (on the one hand) and Islamic (on the other) traditions of “holy portraiture,” the purpose of which is both to provide a visual record of an exemplar’s image but also to control it. Portraiture’s relation to hagiography is also considered, as is the potential for art projects like Green’s to provide a fresh conceptual framework through which interfaith understanding may be facilitated.

In his piece “What Does Interreligious Dialogue Have to Say, and to Whom?,” journalist Jibran Khan asserts that “[i]nterreligious dialogue carries the simple yet strong message that we benefit not only from talking with our peers in ideology and practice, but also from those with whom we disagree” (129). In commenting on the contrasting character of Green’s two series, Khan affirms the place of individual initiative in interfaith dialogue and celebrates the ability of these artworks to remind us that “religious leaders are representatives of a tradition, not embodiments of that tradition in its totality” as he underscores the value of interfaith dialogue in the production of civic virtues, as “a model for diplomacy, academics, and politics alike,” and as a vehicle for the promotion of religious freedom (130).

Conflict resolution specialist Gabrielle Rifkind, in “When Empathy Fails: Managing Radical Differences,” offers insights on the nature of traumatic division between communities and the potential of an art project such as Green’s to enlighten, challenge, and transform—that is, to stimulate “a more collaborative vision of how to live together” (143). In a sequence illustrative of the care with which this volume is curated, Rifkind’s piece is followed (and the analytical content of the volume concluded) by “Encountering the Divine,” in which Skinder Hundal asserts the need for “safe spaces for dangerous conversation, places to unlearn and re-imagine” (147). The interfaith meetings documented and celebrated by Green, he asserts, are examples of such safe spaces. In fact, he argues, “art spaces” also have the capacity to facilitate “complex dialogues, where the argument between faith, art, and culture can take place in ways which reconstruct our collective understanding and identities in non-hierarchical ways . . .” (151).

To what use might this volume be put? It has much to offer the nonspecialist or casual reader. It could, for example, be the stimulus for a rich discussion by a faith-based book club. However, it is also a candidate for inclusion in syllabi for several sorts of courses—those in interfaith dialogue, obviously; but also courses in art appreciation, gender studies, religion and politics, comparative theology, ethics, or anthropology. Its price will be a drawback for some, but the cost will perhaps be mitigated by the book’s aesthetic appeal and its invitation to “read” images at least as carefully as one reads the text. If the book has weaknesses, one might be that it does not provide a full list of the encounters central to the project. It is easy, however, to identify two encounters included in the book: the tenth convening of the Building Bridges Seminar (May 2011, in Doha, Qatar), and the interfaith summit on justice and peace hosted by Pope Benedict XVI (October 2011, in Assisi, Italy). Close reading also reveals the names of a number of Rowan Williams’s one-on-one conversation partners. But I doubt that we can tease out the complete list—and I admit to being curious! Perhaps, however, publication of such a list would breach privacy agreements. Be that as it may, the numerous photographs give us plenty to study in any case. A second weakness may lie in Green’s very thesis: that in the early twenty-first century we have relationships being forged between major religious leaders to a depth previously not seen, a new degree of their willingness “to sit down together and consider possibilities for cooperation, dialogue, and friendship, in which they actively articulate their respect for other faiths without compromising the truth of their own tradition” (26). I believe such willingness was evident well prior to 2008—Green’s starting point. I certainly can think of examples from the closing decades of the twentieth century. But I do agree with Nicola Green that such good news about interreligious engagement is seriously underreported. Her project provides a welcome corrective; her determination to have it analyzed from a range of perspectives under the expert guidance of editor Aaron Rosen has resulted in a resource about dialogue that itself has dialogical dimensions. The intriguing cover of *Encounters: The Art of Interfaith Dialogue* invites the reader to look inside. It is an invitation worth accepting.

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