

*Sharing Wisdom: Benefits and Boundaries of Interreligious Learning*. Edited by Alon Goshen-Gottstein. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017. 136 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4985-4557-0. \$79.00, hardcover.

Recently, when I was guest-speaking to a class of seminarians, relaying the latest facts regarding student religious, secular, and spiritual life on college campuses, one student asked me, "How can religious students thrive on campus?" I paused, sensing her earnestness. She was, in effect, asking: "As a future religious professional, how can I aid in their thriving?"

I relayed what I had learned from my own experience on college campuses: "The students who are thriving are the ones who have examined their values and beliefs, know the history of their traditions, and are affirmed in their identities enough to engage others with curiosity. A thriving student is willing and able to wonder, eat, celebrate, mourn, and learn with those of different identities, in large part because they have a basic understanding of humility." I assert that this is true beyond higher education, too.

We must examine the structural components that aid (or do not aid) this kind of thriving. A campus needs to have policies and practices in place to uphold this obligation to students, and this is work I do with *Convergence on Campus*. The conversation before the one I just recounted had detailed how Christo-normative higher education is, and considered how to honor the respective spaces of different worldviews while also facilitating connections. But this student's question wasn't coming from a place of systems-level thinking; rather, I felt it came from a deeply personal place, a place of yearning for more understanding of how to engage successfully and authentically across difference. Perhaps put another way, her question was, "What do I need to know about myself to engage fully and respectfully with someone else?"

*Sharing Wisdom: Benefits and Boundaries of Interreligious Learning* would be a resource for this questioner. Wisdom, though particularly defined by each contributor, is broadly that which transcends any particular worldview; it is the sensibility that no one body has the ultimate authority, and that potential teachers are everywhere. It is the acknowledgment that context accords meaning. Now that I am more learned in the concepts and conduct of wisdom from reading this collection, I can say that thriving students are those who have an understanding of wisdom. That is, they have an understanding of their traditions' strengths and frailties, and can respectfully engage with these in other traditions. The search for wisdom is a binding tie for all traditions and worldviews, but the definition of wisdom, the records of wisdom, the methods of discernment, and the obligation to share wisdom vary widely and deeply.

This book was originally assembled for a meeting of the Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders, information I include because I think it is truly an exceptional collection for those who contemplate wisdom regularly. *Sharing Wisdom* aims to illuminate exactly those distinctions and similarities: the definitions, sources, and methods of discerning wisdom in six traditions (Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Muslim, and Jewish). In each essay, scholars contribute the particular facet of wisdom emphasized in their respective traditions. Similarities emerge, differences are evident, and benefits and needed boundaries are suggested. The explicitly stated hope is that this collection, by sharing wisdom "in the right spirit" (xvii), brings about more interreligious peace and human flourishing.

The Christian perspective delineates wisdom as both a set of convictions and advice, which are collectively meant to help people and communities in living well: free of conflict and flourishing, as God intends, and as Jesus Christ modeled. Miroslav Wolf, the Christian essayist, also writes of the self-giving nature of the tradition, and therefore the imperative to share and spread wisdom, which longs to be imparted. He notes that wisdom is often personified, and has a will to be shared through the actions of people, including forgiveness.

In the Hindu perspective, contributed by Anantanand Rambachan, readers are greeted in the first paragraph by a cited definition of wisdom: "Wisdom is freedom from self-centeredness; it is seeing God present equally in all." Note that here wisdom is inherently present in *all* beings—humans and beyond. Rambachan expresses reverence for the diversity of human life and urges that inward contemplations of wisdom are useless and even dangerous if not paired with outward expressions like self-control, just actions, and compassion.

From Pal Ahluwalia's Sikh perspective, wisdom is the ability to discern the meaningful from the meaningless, and so depends on a developed sense of inner knowing, itself a product of direct experience, reflection, and interaction. Sharing wisdom is an expression of love, not an obligation, and this love must permeate the engagement. Sikh wisdom is open to examples from all worldviews, and itself teaches others through the lived example of its followers' love, generosity, and forgiveness.

Buddhist wisdom is purely experiential, and embodied through character. Indeed, Sallie B. King, the essayist, states that it is nonverbal, not even able to be expressed fully by the Buddha. As a skillful teacher, he merely offers the tools towards wisdom, not the content; therefore, sharing, which entails both giving *and receiving*, is the expectation. King suggests that Buddhism is a universal religion, "appropriate for everyone" (49) and if the skills of contemplation reveal more about that which is fundamentally ineffable (wisdom), there is no reason to not share them among many religions and worldviews.

The Muslim contributor, Timothy Gianotti, asserts that wisdom is an attribute of God, and that sharing is a fluid interchange of what has already been given by God, as opposed to a human transaction. It is a Divine quality that humans may gain proximity to, and it is fundamentally transformative because it shifts perspective from the earthly to the eternal. Calling others into a deeper relationship with God is a gift Islamic wisdom can offer, though only without arrogance, for it is God's first and foremost.

Finally, Meir Sendor's Jewish perspective suggests that wisdom is for all people, and revelations are unique; he maintains that boundaries preserve the authenticity and integrity of a tradition's history of revelations with G-d. There are prerequisites for sharing, and they are needed to honor the one who shares wisdom.

The text does an excellent job of avoiding common pitfalls in the work of comparing and contrasting religious traditions. Too often interfaith work essentializes traditions, often by attempting to make direct comparisons through a Christo-normative lens (e.g. framing a comparative question as what each religion *believes* about the divine, when belief is an emphasis in Christianity, but not in many other traditions). Worse, perhaps, is when the work only emphasizes the commonalities (for example, the practice of fasting), thereby diluting rich traditions into their

lowest common denominators. Finally, interfaith work often requires one person to speak for an entire tradition, without space for personal interpretation and alteration. I doubt these pitfalls are new to any reader of this journal, but I state them to distinguish this book. Goshen-Gottstein arranged this text to explore the incredibly layered topic of wisdom, and specifically invites personal comparisons and contradictions without competition.

The crux of the compilation is the paradox that each contributor touches on: the wisdom gleaned by each tradition both belongs and doesn't belong exclusively to the tradition, and yet feels unique. Each tradition contributes its own emphasis and interpretation of this entity called wisdom, which seems, as the scholars describe it, to have its own form beyond human design. Therefore, it cannot "belong" to one tradition, and yet it cannot be denied that each tradition differs in its interaction with wisdom. How, then, should one proceed? Is a tradition obligated to share? Are other traditions obligated to receive? And what about power structures that inherently undervalue and undermine attempts at generous exchange? Each of the scholars speaks in his or her own voice to answer these questions, and the essay framework, though identical for each, is expansive enough to invite resonance and divergence.

Each contributor answers the question "Why Share?," and it is here where the spectrum of differences is most evident. Buddhist and Christian thinking, for example, is very willing to make wisdom easily available, and Jewish sensibilities are more aware of the inherent risk of sharing. The collection's title describes the benefits and boundaries of sharing; more emphasis was needed on that second component. What is lost or risked when a tradition shares its wisdom? What of misunderstanding, appropriation, intentional or unintentional disrespect or commoditization? I wished each contributor had narrated a time when they did or did not share wisdom, and why. For me, these stories would have highlighted exactly what wisdom means to each scholar, and modeled the characteristics needed to engage. Additionally, the collection lacks an Indigenous wisdom keeper, of whom there are many in great variety. I continue to be humbled and grateful to learn from Indigenous wisdoms, and I feel it is a necessary inclusion in future editions, both for a fuller understanding of the subject and due acknowledgment.

In the conclusion, Goshen-Gottstein sifts through the preceding chapters and summarizes wisdom as a universal larger and more complex than any one particular religion could ever capture. He also makes the broader claim that humility is the primary trait wisdom cultivates, and the prerequisite trait for attracting and engaging the wise. This I agree with, and Goshen-Gottstein is right to emphasize the need for a minimized ego when involved in any dialogue across difference. However, the claim that knowledge of God is the best or primary way to cultivate humility would, to say the least, unsettle my secular colleagues as well as those who do not emphasize or hold a belief in a singular God. They are all people with a true respect for the wisdom that heals and melds, and belief is not a requisite for their deep thoughtfulness. I am compelled to encourage more reflection and respect for those with secular and non-theist worldviews, who have the ability to apprehend wisdom sharing and are equally capable of humility.

As a practitioner, I would consider the text particularly valuable in a discussion group or for text learning, with supplemental materials available to give context to the histories and literature mentioned. The book had a feeling of co-consideration, as if the topic—wisdom—were in the middle of a circle, and each contributor was taking a turn describing it to attentive listeners. I myself felt compelled to read the book at a measured pace, one essay a day, to let each contributor

have ample time in my processing. In a setting like the seminary classroom mentioned above, I would use it to structure a conversation about our own respective wisdoms, the practice of humility in encountering others, and how to model this for students on college campuses (to use a specific example from my setting, though anyone can benefit from such modeling). *Sharing Wisdom* is an exceptional resource for anyone seeking thoughts on wisdom itself, and I found it most useful through that lens. Each scholar describes wisdom as a construct and an evolution, and this makes the text an excellent contribution to comparative, respectful interreligious learning. I look forward to re-reading the book and discovering more of its layers.

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