

New Paths for Interreligious Theology: Perry Schmidt-Leukel's Fractal Interpretation of Religious Diversity. Edited by Alan Race and Paul Knitter. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019. 224 pp. ISBN: 978-1-626-98338-0. \$30.63, paperback.

In 2015, Perry Schmidt-Leukel (hereafter SL) gave the prestigious Gifford Lectures on the topic of “interreligious theology.” These lectures were subsequently published by Orbis Books as *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology*, 2017. According to the editors of the present volume, there were two main points to those lectures. The first is a method of doing theology that SL calls “interreligious”; it is very similar to comparative theology, but resting on a pluralistic theological base (viii). The second, which is more intriguing and the subject of these essays, is his “fractal interpretation of religious diversity.”

Basically (although there is nothing basic about it), SL’s fractal proposal starts with a mathematical concept first applied to the natural world by Benoît Mandelbrot. The argument is that the same patterns that are seen on a macro-level are replicated on a micro-level—similar patterns reoccurring on progressively smaller scales. Examples of this are snowflakes, mountain goat horns, ice crystals, and mountain ranges. When this idea is applied to religious diversity, SL argues, one can see that the same differences that occur between religions also occur within them. And further, those same differences occur between individual human beings. As the editors conclude, “the religions are neither all the same nor incommensurably different but similar in their internal diversity, which means that no religion is a total stranger to any other religion” (viii).

This book, then, came out of a desire to test this proposal, and after a session at the American Academy of Religion, which is often how religious scholars test ideas, and a few additional contributions, the manuscript came together. The essays are bookended by SL’s introduction to his proposal, and his response to the authors. In their own introduction, the editors have chosen to group the responses into three categories: chapters of affirmation; chapters of correction; and chapters that point out “possibly debilitating inadequacies” and potential fixes. However, that is not the order in which they appear. Instead, the chapters fall under two headings: “Methodological/Contextual Perspectives” and “Multireligious Perspectives” (that is, chapters that respond to the proposal from a specific religious perspective). Frankly, I think it would have been more helpful to group them according to the editors’ introduction; and as the editors say as much, I’m not clear why this format wasn’t followed.

There are, of course, too many chapters to discuss individually here (ten total), so I only mention four specifically. Given the wide-ranging responses, it is likely that not all will be of equal interest to any one reader, but it is equally likely that there will be at least a few chapters that will be of interest to many.

The first chapter I want to mention is Frank Clooney’s, which falls under the category of “correcting.” This chapter, which the editors call “feisty,” takes on SL’s critique of comparative theology, and raises interesting issues around different understandings of inclusivism and pluralism. Clooney self-describes as an “includer,” rather than a proponent of “inclusivism,” which is an important distinction. He writes, “My work is fruitful, I have hoped, because I embrace not so much a theoretical inclusivism as a theologically informed practice of including...”(45). In this volume, his essay is significant because it delves the deepest into fractal theory, which, as noted

earlier, is not easy for a non-specialist to understand. I appreciated Clooney's description of Mandelbrot's research and his "maverick path," which Clooney uses as a way to characterize the difference between his approach and SL's—both constructive in their own ways.

The second chapter I mention is Hans Gustafson's chapter on "pansacrality," which is "affirming," per the editors. Gustafson lays out his theory of "panentheistic pansacramentalism," which he argues has kinship with SL's proposal, even though they clearly are different. Gustafson explains the difference this way: "A fractal theory of religious diversity is a phenomenological observation or assertion about the differences between and within religion. Pansacramentalism is a theological perspective claiming that all things can serve as potential mediator of the divine" (81). Coming from a Christian perspective, pansacrality is an interesting elaboration on panentheism, and the possibilities it suggests for interreligious engagement are intriguing.

The third and fourth chapters I highlight are Ephraim Meir's response from a Jewish perspective, and Maria Massi Dakake's chapter from a Muslim perspective, both of which the editors deem as "fixing." Both of these essays are important, not simply because they represent a perspective other than Christian—always a welcome breath of fresh air—but because the alternate views they propose warrant serious consideration.

Meir, who comes out of a self-proclaimed practical orientation, argues that SL's proposal does not give enough weight to ethical considerations. He proposes the Möbius strip to highlight the "intertwinedness of the relation to the Ultimate with the interdependence of all human beings" (138), and argues for a more "existential-ethical way of approaching the ultimate reality" (141). His discussion of Martin Buber's description of *emuna* is particularly interesting.

For her part, Dakake appreciates the possibilities SL's proposal creates for allowing "elements of a given religious tradition that might lie outside the religion's 'mainstream' but that are nonetheless spiritually important and intellectually influential to be seen as organic developments within that tradition itself." However, her concern is that in seeking a path to mutual understanding between religions, too much is compromised, such that the interpretation that is proposed is not acceptable for insiders as legitimate doctrine. (Here she is talking about the concept of "sonship" in both Christian and Muslim perspectives). By contrast, she suggests the concept of *barzakh*, which comes directly from the Qur'an and points to "a meeting point between two realms or realities that can never merge, or lose their distinctiveness, but which can meet and dwell briefly with one another" (173). In essence, she argues that briefer and more specific interreligious encounters, "liminal and temporary in nature" (172), can be more fruitful than grander narratives.

Overall, the volume is very rich, with lots of food for thought and many interesting proposals to consider. It would be particularly fruitful as a complement to *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology*. It is not for the introductory reader, but for advanced students and scholars in the field.

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