

***Critical Religious Pluralism in Higher Education: A Social Justice Framework to Support Religious Diversity.* By Jenny L. Small. Routledge Research in Higher Education. New York: Routledge, 2020. 94 pp. ISBN 9780367438104. \$60.00 hardback; \$21.95 eBook.**

In this new monograph, Dr. Jenny Small probes issues of religious pluralism and equity with an eye for applications in higher education research methodology and in policies and practices for student engagement. She builds upon her first monograph, *Understanding College Students' Spiritual Identities: Different Faiths, Varied Worldviews* (2011) and upon her edited volume, *Making Meaning: Embracing Spirituality, Faith, Religion, and Life Purpose in Student Affairs* (2015); yet, this new book takes a bolder approach. By highlighting some inadequacies of interreligious dialogue initiatives, and by pointing out gaps in prior research on student religious identities and experiences on US campuses, Small offers a critical approach to religious pluralism and aims for no less than societal transformation.

The book details why critical theory is necessary in examining religious identity (chapter 1), meticulously reviews existing literature (chapters 2 and 3), specifies a framework for interrogating religious oppression and Christian privilege within the higher education landscape (chapter 4), and suggests further practical applications (chapter 5). Throughout the book, Small calls attention to the intersections between religious and other privileged or minoritized identities. She is in conversation with leading voices at the intersections of critical theory, religious pluralism, and student development. Though focused on the US higher education context, her work has wider relevance.

The framework that Small articulates, “Critical Religious Pluralism Theory” (CRPT), is focused on the role of “religious privilege, oppression, hegemony, and marginalization in maintaining inequality between Christians and non-Christians” (7). Small is careful to articulate that this framework does not entail dismantling Christianity as a religion, but that it does call for dismantling the normative power of Christianity in US culture—something that admittedly might seem less than desirable to Christians. Small points out that injustices are often unintentional, but that lack of religious literacy exacerbates prejudices, stokes antagonism, and contributes to the erasure (intentional or otherwise) of other identities and worldviews.

Pointing to the success of critical race studies, gender studies, Latinx criticism, and other identity-based critical approaches, Small asserts that religious diversity, too, needs to be seen through a critical lens in order to effectively interrogate the power structures that advantage Christianity or promote the “false neutral” (51) of secularism, a concept that is not in fact neutral but that is historically informed by Christianity and also by whiteness. “Critical theories examine privilege and marginalization, making us aware of who holds the power in society, who receives unearned benefits, and who suffers under the weight of systemic oppression” (1), she writes. A critical religious pluralism, then, works “to dismantle religious privilege, not religion itself” (9).

Christian markers of religiosity are, in certain respects, on the decline in the United States, but this does not mean that the subordination of religious minorities has ended, as Small points out. She is also careful to emphasize that some Christian-identified students, such as Evangelicals, benefit from Christian privilege but are also some of the most likely to report feeling minoritized on their campuses. As a remedy to the current widespread inadequacies, Small calls for an embrace of pluralistic engagement—an intentional seeking out of encounter across difference based on a “humanizing view of others” (9). In essence, beliefs that are dehumanizing and marginalizing, Small argues, must be dismantled for the collective good and replaced by an ethic of engaged pluralism and social inclusion. This will require making discussions of religion less taboo and intimidating. It will entail a more robust inclusion of conservative and traditional perspectives in liberal and progressive spaces. It will also entail attentiveness to religion as a cultural identity.

Small emphasizes that religious, spiritual, and secular identities are not merely up to personal choice, but that identities are conditioned by factors such as socialization and upbringing and physical appearance. For instance, students who do not fit the normative white Protestant expression of Christianity often face the paradox of either trying to shed an identity that is inherent to their being, in an attempt to conform, whereas to the dominant group they are perceived as outsiders, regardless of their own self-concept or effort. This detrimental dynamic is not just experienced at the individual level, but it is also experienced in the aggregate when certain affinity groups are relegated and isolated, meaning that they cannot effectively redress oppressions through collective solidarity.

In this context, Small discusses the racialization of religion, inadequate accommodation policies, insufficient space allocation, academic calendars that normalize Christian holidays without due recognition of other groups, and the challenges of studying in an institution that diminishes the importance of certain religious, secular, or spiritual identities. Small also situates her own identities in relation to the work she stakes out. She laments her early-career inability to fully articulate the social change-oriented goals of her scholarship, goals that were obscured by “so-called research objectivity” (29). She calls for scholarship that: 1) articulates religious pluralism as a site of societal transformation; 2) calls attention to structures of religious inequality; 3) articulates anti-oppressive praxis for working with students of different identities; and 4) locates religion in a cultural context beyond its inner dimensions.

Small’s book not only makes a strong case for engaged scholarship, but it articulates a compelling roadmap for professionals in higher educational settings. The book is ideal for classroom use for those in education-related programs; in chapters 4 and 5, Small provides detailed methodology for research and practice. This work is necessary reading for religious life professionals on campuses and is relevant for other institutional and workplace settings. The issues are of particular importance for K–12 schools who are also wrestling with questions of equity and worldview diversity. Small lays out an ambitious project but contends that critical theories do indeed transform societal structures and dominant cultures. It remains to be seen if educational institutions who articulate diversity as a core value are ready for this next level commitment.

Celene Ibrahim  
Groton School

The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles published by the *Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS)* are the authors' own and do not reflect or represent those of the *JIRS* staff, the *JIRS* Board of Advisors, or *JIRS* publishing partners.