

***Faith Encounters of the Third Kind: Humility and Hospitality in Interfaith Dialogue.* By David J. Brewer. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2021. xii + 205 pp. \$44.00 (hardcover); \$29.00 (paperback); \$27.00 (eBook). ISBN 9781725258464**

The playful title of David J. Brewer's recent monograph foreshadows the strange – and playful! – things that occur when adherents of different religious traditions meet each other with curiosity, openness, and willingness to learn. The foundational research for *Faith Encounters of the Third Kind* lies in the author's doctoral dissertation at Fuller Theological Seminary, but this monograph presents far more than a revised dissertation, both due to its more ambitious scope and its much more polished format. Brewer aspires here to provide philosophical and theological justifications for why Christians should engage in dialogue at all, to identify distinct virtues and resources with which they should do so, and then to indicate areas of learning and growth between Christianity and four other major religious traditions. This is a tall task for a slim volume, but possible because Brewer's intention from the beginning is to lean forward, indicating seeds for future transformation more so than transformations already accomplished, with the hope that others will carry these conversations further.

Brewer's argument unfolds in three parts. Part I presents a philosophical and theological approach to interreligious dialogue. Deep pluralism, hospitality, humility, and mission emerge as key concepts in the discussion. Readers from the Methodist tradition will feel particularly at home in this volume, as the author approaches questions in a Wesleyan key, albeit one informed by a clear sympathy for process theology. Brewer also draws upon Alasdair MacIntyre as a central methodological interlocutor, primarily MacIntyre's notion of tradition-based rationality. But apart from the close attention to MacIntyre, Brewer's bibliography shows much more engagement with Protestant scholarship than Catholic: Catholic figures that one might expect to appear in discussions of the themes Brewer treats (one thinks first of David Burrell, Catherine Cornille, Leo Lefebure, Gerald O'Collins, and Peter Phan, among others) are either unrepresented or underrepresented, depending on the issue at hand.

Part II examines mutual constructive engagement between the Abrahamic faiths, concentrating on two main issues: questions of divine providence (and related matters like human free will) and questions of the relationship of religious belief to modern science. The material on providence hews the closest to Brewer's dissertation, and while his discussion is clear, it adds little to the current literature on this topic. The fundamental insight that medieval Jews, Christians, and Muslims developed their concepts of divine action and human free will in interaction with each other neither is novel nor demands as a foundation the humility and hospitality that Brewer promotes in Part I. Things become less balanced when Brewer integrates modern science into the conversation. In search of a credible way of speaking about God's action in the world, Brewer sketches at length a Non-Interventionist, Objective Divine Action (NIODA) theory that would satisfy theological criteria from the Christian tradition and cohere with scientific theories like special relativity, general relativity, and quantum mechanics. While Brewer's discussion here is intriguing, this reader felt the arc of the book's argument bending in a condescending direction: in the Middle Ages, each of these Abrahamic traditions benefited from each other, but now, it is Christianity that has something of value to offer Jews and Muslims, should Jews and Muslims be willing to engage. Brewer does not suggest that Christians stand only to give to and not to benefit from others—he finds Seyyed Hossein Nasr's notion of the sacrality of knowledge meritorious, if shorn of its Neoplatonism—but the volume carries a clear sense of Christianity's intellectual

mission in this modern age of science. The benefits of interreligious engagement are certainly mutual in Brewer's portrait, but—at the risk of invoking formulations from the Jacques Dupuis affair—this often seems like a mutual, asymmetrical benefit.

Part III presents the mutually constructive engagement between Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism, particularly regarding metaphysics and science. This section does not provide the meaty food-for-thought that one finds in Part II, perhaps because Brewer spends time presenting the “basics” of Buddhism and Hinduism, something he does not do for the Abrahamic traditions. On one hand this groundwork is necessary—Brewer rightly cannot presuppose that his readers possess a foundational understanding of Buddhist cosmology—but questions of whether or not Hinduism is a “religion” and whether or not Hinduism is a “tradition” take the discussion slightly off-course and do not seem essential for the author to make his argument. The chapters on Buddhism and Hinduism are about equivalent in length to the preceding chapters, but because they include this introductory material, they feel less substantial and thus add less to the overall contribution of the book. The basic argument runs in parallel to the argument of Part II, however: Christianity and other traditions each stand to gain from their engagement with each other and can help each other resolve epistemological crises—and this point is all the more remarkable when discussing Asian traditions whose modes of rationality diverge so greatly from those of the Abrahamic traditions. In the particular case of Buddhism, the absence of a belief in a Creator does not annul the difficulties and tensions that Buddhists must address as they stand before modern science and consider how Buddhist metaphysical claims do or do not cohere with scientific research.

While key elements of *Faith Encounters* emerge from a doctoral thesis, Brewer's monograph does not read like a dissertation. Much of the critical apparatus present in a thesis has been removed or simplified and the book generally flows well. This does leave some lacunae in the text, however. Brewer does not always take pains to clarify his own position vis-à-vis some familiar names in the field. A reader wonders, for example, whether Brewer's “mutually constructive engagement” differs in any meaningful way from what John Cobb calls “mutual transformation.” Given the effusive favor shown for process theology in Part III, this reader cannot tell a difference, other than that “mutually constructive engagement” somehow sounds more MacIntyrean. And does Brewer's understanding of “deep pluralism” differ meaningfully from that of Cobb and other process theologians? On this point, Brewer is honest and up front: he acknowledges that there are other forms of deep pluralism and that he intends to concentrate on his own approach (30). In brief, Brewer claims that religious traditions experience different processes of formation, each shaped by unique historical conditions. Because each tradition develops distinctively in response to its own historical circumstances, each tradition crafts its own language and conceptual categories to describe and interpret those experiences. This results in “fundamentally different conceptions of reality and different prescriptions for engaging it. This means that religious traditions are not essentially the same, nor are they saying the same thing” (36). One should note here Brewer's insistence upon a distinction between religious experiences themselves and the language we use to describe them. Interreligious dialogue occurs on the level of description, never challenging the authenticity of another's experience. The distinction also informs Brewer's missiology. The purpose of Christian mission for him is not to introduce new religious experiences, but to “provide better descriptive language for the authentic religious experiences that indigenous persons have already had” (63). Brewer articulates well that a

commitment to interreligious dialogue does not void the ongoing impetus to Christian mission, all the while insisting that past models of cultural imperialism cannot stay.

But something's still missing: this reader remains unclear about how language functions for Brewer. If one asserts that a Buddhist and a Christian are not "saying the same thing," does this mean that the Buddhist and the Christian truly have different experiences, or merely that their descriptive language for their common experience is not the same? And if the experiences themselves are truly different, does this mean that Christian missionaries assist others by providing descriptive language for religious experiences of a kind that the Christians themselves have never had? Based on Brewer's exegesis of Peter's encounter with Cornelius in Acts 10 (66-67), this would be the case, but it seems instead that Brewer presumes an underlying unity of authentic religious experience across religious traditions. The monograph's focus on description thus leads to some confusion about what Brewer means when he calls himself a deep pluralist. Given the way that other advocates of deep pluralism build their case for it, greater precision would have been helpful. To take one example, in two essays in *Deep Religious Pluralism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), a volume Brewer never cites, David Ray Griffin criticizes the tendency of theologians to use the word "pluralism" for one species of pluralism: an identity pluralism that, according to Griffin, should be considered a superficial pluralism, if it is pluralism at all. Although Brewer insists on the real differences between traditions not just at the level of linguistic expression but at the level of rational resources, I nevertheless suspect that Brewer would also fall under Griffin's indictment. Griffin contrasts this identity pluralism with deep pluralism, a position Griffin identifies primarily with Cobb. Because Brewer so frequently emphasizes the depth of his pluralism (pardon the pun), I would have liked to see Brewer define his position more clearly against other options, especially because I am more skeptical than Brewer about the compatibility of MacIntyre's approach to tradition-based rationality with deep pluralism in the heritage of Alfred North Whitehead via Cobb. If Brewer were forced to make a choice here, it seems that he would follow MacIntyre, but the possible tensions pass by without being named and explored.

In conclusion, congratulations to David J. Brewer for an impressive volume. Each time I paged through the book again in the preparation of this review, I found it stronger than I had remembered and that Brewer had anticipated and preempted several lines of challenge or criticism. Despite any shortcomings, this monograph is scripturally rooted, philosophically serious, and demonstrates scholarly knowledge of several major religious traditions, arguing that Christians should engage them with humility and hospitality. Readers, whether Christian or not, will benefit.

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