

## Book Review

***With the Best of Intentions: Interreligious Missteps and Mistakes.* Edited by Lucinda Mosher, Elinor J. Pierce, and Or N. Rose. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2023. xi+220pp. ISBN 978-1-62698-545-2. \$35.00 (paperback) \$28.50 (Kindle).**



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Good teaching (and preaching) is often confessional: admitting mistakes we have made helps listeners learn from their own. Rather than hearing judgment, they hear that we are imperfect but can do better. This book makes important contributions to interreligious studies and interfaith relationships by modeling this sort of self-examination. The editors bring together people from a variety of faiths, with a balance of men and women, academics and interreligious practitioners, younger authors who have made their rookie errors recently and older ones who made theirs decades ago.

The editors also round up more than the usual suspects. Bin Song describes interreligious events where his Confucian/Ru philosophy and practices did not fit well into other faiths' assumptions about what constituted a religion. Ajisebo McElwaine Abimbola tells how the organizers of the Parliament of World Religions did not anticipate the difficulties she would have trying to take the sacred objects she needed for Nigerian Ifá rituals through Australian customs. Several people who participate in multiple religions share the difficulties they face trying to fit into many multifaith groups.

Most of the *faux pas* recounted here result from ignorance, not malice. When Soren Hessler held a class for Jewish and Christian students in the chapel of a United Methodist university, he discovered that some descendants of kohanim (Jewish priests) avoid going near human remains, including the interred ashes of the University's founder. While leading a youth trip that included visits to an African American church, a Korean Buddhist temple, and a multi-ethnic mosque, the Rev. Marcia Moret Sietstra eagerly reached out to shake hands with a male host at the *masjid*, who declined to make contact. A planning failure made things worse: The kids had no time to debrief their experiences. She was momentarily embarrassed by her assumption that cross-gender contact would be welcome; the kids remained angry because they thought a Muslim acted rudely toward their pastor.

Other errors result from unexamined assumptions. Eboo Patel confesses that his most-frequent mistake is assuming that others share his definition of justice. Rachel Mikva tells how she offended a colleague she invited to a pro-choice rally. He agreed with her about public policy

but not theology. When somebody sang “An Acorn is Not a Tree,” he fumed: he saw a fetus as a human being but would not impose his belief on others. Maggie Goldberger, an abortion doula, describes her anger when pro-choice clergy make Catholics the butt of jokes.

Cross-cultural and interfaith missteps often occur when we assume others know what we mean. Francis X. Clooney, SJ tells about a time some Buddhist nuns visited a Catholic Mass he hosted at Harvard. He greeted them warmly and assured them they were welcome but suggested that it would be best if they did not take communion. They readily agreed—and then received the Eucharist, shocking a Catholic student. Not knowing what was meant by *communion*, they did what others did. The scandalized student talked with the nuns, though, and discovered how much they had in common. Innocent mistakes need not be catastrophic.

We also fall short of the mark, Hussein Rashid suggests, when we assume that the best way to respect the faith of others is to avoid our differences. As a Muslim, he finds, he prefers Christian worship that welcomes his participation without expecting him to join in every part of the service over well-intentioned attempts to seek the lowest common denominator.

Another common failure, Bilal Ansari points out, is planning logistics in detail without giving much thought to group dynamics. He and other college chaplains failed to anticipate that Black and white students might experience a civil rights museum differently—and ended up ticked off at each other.

Some essays are painful to read. Bilal Ansari recounts slights, insults, and threats he endured as a Muslim prison chaplain. Wakoh Shannon Hickey tells how, week after week, students disrupted the meditation sessions at her seminary by talking loudly as they walked through the chapel, despite signs imploring, “Meditation in progress. Please help to maintain the silence.” Asked why they did this, several classmates responded, “Well, this is a Christian school” as if that excused their rudeness. Not knowing that Christians often pray silently, they did not notice that Hickey’s fellow contemplatives all were Christian.

Some contributors recount clueless behavior they have observed; braver souls share times they themselves have offended others. Daniel Berman, for example, tells how he offended a multifaith and multiracial group of clergy when he showed them a television program in which a Black Christian woman joyfully converts to Judaism and goes to the mikvah, assured by a Jewish friend that this ritual bath will wash away her “Christian filth.” Berman realizes immediately that he had failed to see the episodes through the eyes of his Christian colleagues and apologized to them. It took time to rebuild trust with pastors, he reports, but they remain dear friends.

One of the final reflections, about antisemitism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is particularly hard to read but especially helpful in our present moment. C. Denise Yarbrough learns that muting campus protesters who want to shift the focus of a Zoom meeting does not ultimately silence them. She also learns how powerful are the dynamics of intersectionality. People of color often perceive Jews as benefitting from white privilege, despite past and present prejudice against them, and often mistrust their participation in social justice efforts, assuming that they support “settler colonialism” no matter how critical of Israeli policies and supportive of Palestinian rights they may be. Simply trying to define antisemitism can get you charged with antisemitism.

Because so much of this fine book grapples with serious issues, I wish it included a few more funny stories. Humor, particularly self-deprecating humor, has a way of sneaking around our defenses and helping us to see our own shortcomings. So does confessional preaching, and this volume is a fine example of that.

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