

From Bubble to Bridge: Educating Christians for a Multifaith World

By Marion H. Larson and Sara L. H. Shady. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017. 209 pp. \$19 paper.

In a world that is increasingly polarized, many times because of religious differences, how do we get Evangelical Christian college and university students more properly educated about and involved in multifaith engagement? Despite the great need, as Eboo Patel notes in the Foreword to this book, “[T]he single most challenging group to involve in interfaith efforts is the evangelical Christian community” (p. xi). This volume discusses ways in which this situation might be addressed. The premise of the book from which everything else flows is stated in the Introduction: “Christians who seek to live and serve graciously in a religiously diverse world must also deliberately and thoughtfully engage with our religious neighbors” (p. 3). The process of how this can be done is set forth in eight chapters by Larson and Shady who are involved in what they are describing as “interfaith engagement.” As the chapters unfold, various helpful arguments are set forth. These arguments include discussions of 1) interfaith engagement as a civic and religious imperative, an argument that Christians are better off if they are involved with their religious neighbors rather than staying isolated in their intrafaith bubbles; 2) a model for interfaith encounters—how to cultivate important virtues needed for such engagement; and a chapter that describes how to create a learning environment conducive to positive interfaith work. Other chapters provide samples of learning activities, as well as a discussion of interfaith engagement outside the Christian intrafaith bubble. Each chapter of the book is followed by brief essays that explore practical examples of what was discussed in the preceding material. This volume also includes a helpful list of recommended resources, including books and videos.

There were some initial concerns for this reviewer going into the volume, but I was pleasantly surprised to the contrary. The first concern was terminology related to approach. Although the book title incorporates the word “multifaith,” the authors use “interfaith” throughout. Conservative Evangelicals have tended to shy away from interfaith approaches for fear of compromise (in distinction to the multifaith engagement model developed by certain Evangelicals), but the authors of this volume present a different approach, one that Evangelicals should consider supporting. Another concern was that the authors have a connection to Eboo Patel and the Interfaith Youth Core. I have great respect for Patel and IFYC, but previously he has tended to avoid discussion of religious truth claims, relegating them to the private side of faith, and instead emphasized the public dimension of interfaith cooperation. But in recent years this has changed, so that doctrine and differences are incorporated into the model of interfaith education being advocated. The authors state clearly that theological differences are important to such dialogue and that what they are advocating “isn’t about fostering theological relativism” (5). They also state that “[s]ome beliefs and teachings are ultimately irreconcilable, and ignoring this fact can be problematic” (26). Evangelicals should welcome this approach to interfaith encounters and education.

This book is also helpful in painting an accurate picture of where many conservative Evangelicals are in living their faith, particularly in relation to those in other religions. One author draws upon Brian McLaren's discussion of a "'conflicted' religious identity syndrome" (p. 56) that is often forged in opposition to multifaith neighbors. This concept is connected a little later in this book to the observations by way of a citation of someone who describes Evangelicalism as a movement that "flourishes on differences, engagement, tension, conflict, and threat" (p. 61). Related to the Evangelical emphasis on threat, another key insight on Evangelicals is recognized in this book where "too often Christians believe that the best way to live as faithful followers of Christ is through so-called 'purity,' making sure not to associate too closely with those whose beliefs are opposed to the gospel" (p. 65). I will return to this important issue later in the review.

One other area touched on in this volume that makes it worthwhile is its recognition of the importance of the emotions in multifaith encounters. Although the authors tend to emphasize the importance of the cognitive, understandable given that this volume is aimed at Evangelicals in college and university settings, nevertheless the importance of emotion is recognized as well. One author states that "learning is both cognitive and affective" (p. 6), and another encourages "imaginative empathy," where "empathy is a cognitive as well as a moral virtue" (p. 104). Although critical thinking is surely necessary for improved multifaith engagement, and to the process of getting more Evangelical college and university students prepared for this activity, the affective dimension is also tremendously important, and as we will see, it is often underappreciated if not neglected in studies of multifaith engagement.

These and other facets come together so that this is an important book that makes a needed contribution to Evangelical approaches to theological education in regards to multifaith engagement. Even so, exploring a few of the issues it covers in more depth would have made this an even more helpful volume. Two of these areas have been discussed above, and in the remainder of this review I will elaborate on them.

First is the issue of purity. Consider two seemingly unrelated questions: "Why aren't more Evangelicals involved in interfaith dialogue?" And, "Why are those that do using an alternative model called 'multifaith engagement' often labeled as compromisers involved in syncretism?" The answer to both of these questions relates to Evangelical concerns for purity. Scientific studies in social psychology have discovered that people have various moral foundations, and that conservatives and liberals emphasize different foundations in the way they view and interact with the world. Liberals tend to emphasize the "fairness" foundation which gives them their interests in fighting what they see as injustice related to certain groups in culture. It is this moral foundation that makes interfaith involvement so appealing for liberals or people who lean more liberal or progressive. Conservatives, however, tend to emphasize the "sanctity" as well as "authority" and "loyalty" moral foundations. The sanctity foundation takes the lead with a strong concern for maintaining the purity of the group. In the case of Evangelicals this means the purity of the church, and moving outward, to the country (conceived of as Judeo-Christian in its origins). Those who are viewed as challenges to this

purity, including those in other religions, are seen as threats to the health of the group. With this dynamic at play, those who advocate interfaith approaches are understood as forms of compromise to purity, and this idea is then filtered through the moral foundations of authority and loyalty. Evangelicals who get “too close and positive” with those in other religions, beyond attempts at evangelism, are seen as being unbiblical and heretical (based upon the authority foundation), and betraying Evangelicalism and the church (based upon the loyalty foundation). If we want to make greater strides in getting Evangelicals involved in more positive forms of multifaith engagement, including college and university students, steps will need to be taken to acknowledge and work through Evangelical moral foundations while also encouraging greater use of more liberal foundations like fairness.

This brings us to the next area where this book could have gone deeper, and that is in the area of affect. While imaginative empathy as advocated in this book is to be encouraged, it faces great emotional challenges. Scientific studies have been done with Christians where merely thinking about the beliefs of other religions elicits a disgust reaction. Just as one may feel repulsed by the thought of eating contaminated food that poses a threat to health, so the thought of other religions often leads to a feelings of disgust in the socio-moral domain. And disgust isn’t the only emotion that many Evangelicals feel toward those in other religions. According to a Pew Survey, many of these feelings are negative, and they provide us with a significant challenge in fostering more positive emotions toward multifaith neighbors.

Finally, although using critical thinking skills and gaining new insights about other religions and their adherents is needed, the use of cognitive processes in this endeavor needs to be reassessed. Studies in social psychology reveal that people often initially operate with intuitions, and reasoning then confirms the initial perspectives. New perspectives, particularly those that run counter to firmly held assumptions, are usually not changed simply by providing new information and reasoned arguments. Instead, consideration should be given to how new intuitions can be developed, and once this is in place it creates space for new rationales to be formed to elaborate on and ground the intuitions in critical thinking.

IVP Academic has done Evangelicals a great service in publishing this volume. Its authors have made an important contribution to the work on multifaith engagement from an Evangelical perspective. It is my hope that this is but the first in several volumes that take this approach and develop its themes further.

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