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Teaching for a Multifaith World; From Bubble to Bridge: Educating Christians for a Multifaith World

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Teaching for a Multifaith World

Eleazar S Fernandez, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017, \$28.36 pbk, 217 pp., ISBN 9781498239745.

From Bubble to Bridge: Educating Christians for a Multifaith World

Marion H Larson and Sara LH Shady, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017, \$14.11 pbk, 208 pp., ISBN 9780830851560

Similar but different is the metaphor to describe both multifaith books reviewed here—similar in that both are exploring the many facets of how to live in our multifaith world today, and different because the books are written for different audiences and ages. *Teaching for a Multifaith World*, edited by Eleazar S Fernandez, is written for an audience of seminarians. The language is pastoral and the book is a compilation from writers from many well-respected seminaries across the United States. The title of the book implies that this might be a textbook in a course within a religious studies program. *From Bubble to Bridge*, written by Marion Larson and Sara Shady, with several co-authors, may more likely be used more broadly, from senior capstone courses in Christian universities to churchbased small-group studies. Both books focus on issues within the United States, and some of the views could be carried to other developed countries outside the USA. Neither book is mission-oriented or directly intended for use in conversion of people to the Christian faith.

There is a difference in language when using the terms *multifaith* and *interfaith*. To be multifaith is to feel an affinity with aspects of more than one religion, philosophy or worldview, and perhaps to believe that no one is superior to the others. This term should not be confused with interfaith, which concerns the communication between different religions. Both books use these terms almost interchangeably, and could cause some confusion in the reading as to what is motivating the dialogue.

Both books are timely in the authors' desire to address our increasingly diverse faith-based world. It is not enough to profess a Christian faith today without the ability to understand and walk with those of differing faith backgrounds. This diversity goes beyond comparative religion courses as the idea of multifaith competencies would allow individuals to hold fast to their own beliefs and empathize with and understand other faith traditions. Starting from a point of breaking through the bubble of Christian education or seminary work, the multifaith or interfaith dialogues in both books are highly needed in today's world.

Larsen and Shady say that the premise of *From Bubble to Bridge* is that we have “both a theological imperative to move beyond our own religious bubbles, but our bubble spaces can be healthy environments for practicing the skills and traits we need for constructive interfaith engagement” (p. 13). They provide case studies throughout the book for use as teaching tools in the classroom. Larsen and Shady view their work as a partial response to Putnam and Campbell's claim in *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (Simon and Schuster, 2010),

that multifaith understanding is “... a civic imperative as America still has the highest rate of religiosity among the industrialized democratic nations. Even so, America is becoming increasingly religiously diverse.”

Whereas Larsen and Shady focus on the civic imperative, the writers in *Teaching for a Multifaith World* come at the subject from a more theological viewpoint. Most of the authors are professors in seminaries who teach world religion courses and have noticed that students lack multifaith competencies. On their account, future pastors and Christian leaders must be equipped to serve people of all faiths and backgrounds, inside and outside of America.

Fernandez and his co-authors are able to pack a lot of punch in 200 pages. Authors address context, curriculum, and confirmation, as well as issues of justice and spiritual formation for both students and pastors. In retrospect, two chapters stood out for me as I have continued to think about the issues far beyond the reading. “Chaplaincy Education Meets Multireligious Literacy Development: Strategies for Teaching Models and Methods of Spiritual Caregiving in Multifaith Contexts,” by Lucinda Mosher, brings valuable insight into the world of chaplains and their role in and out of religious institutions. If any population should have strong multifaith literacy it should be chaplains. In 2004, *Common Standards for Professional Chaplaincy* were endorsed. Mosher has taken those standards and developed a competency matrix and checklists that include a multi-religious literacy inventory and an interfaith literacy inventory, therefore addressing both areas within one course.

The second chapter was “Spiritual Formation in a Multifaith World,” by Ruben Habito. Because Habito defines and explains several pedagogical strategies, his chapter gave great insight into why Christians need to become literate in the ways of other world religions. What stood out to me was the idea that “... encountering persons of other religions with a spirit of openness and neighborliness has led many Christians to life-transforming experiences. Interreligious friendships that come to mature out of encounters with [religious others are] being noted by more and more voices as a locus for encountering the living God” (p. 120). In this manner, both books, reaching far different audiences, are able to provide concrete strategies for all Christians to practice their desire to understand other cultures and religions.

In *From Bubble to Bridge*, Amy Poppinga writes in her case study, “Inside the Bubble: Creating a Nurturing Learning Environment,” about the power in stories and face-to-face interactions. Focusing mainly on the Muslim faith, she shares how she uses hospitality as a central theme for her course to “... force my students (and myself) to demystify the idea of the ‘other’ and recognize that all people are worthy of our hospitality and our empathy” (p. 129).

While the authors of *From Bubble to Bridge* are timely, there are some limitations in the book. There is a strong focus on the Muslim population throughout the chapters, far more than any of the other world religions. This might be a result of media focus on this people group or it may be that our Christian colleges and universities are not having the hard conversations about the Islamic religion outside of negative reports. Another area I noticed was over-reliance on the writings of Miroslav Volf and Martin Buber. Although both offer strong teachings on inclusion, the concepts of multifaith and interfaith seem to be in need of a more contemporary view, appropriate to the current political and social environment in the United States.

On the other hand, the authors of *Teaching in a Multifaith World* may have succeeded in a project that is comprehensively sound in educating our future seminarians to lead and serve in the present political and social environment. This book addresses competencies, curriculum and spiritual formation, including pastoral care, public ministry, and the arts. It is a broader overview that

addresses the various roles of religion in a religiously pluralistic context.

Both books are genuinely appropriate for the audiences they are meant to serve. Educators in both seminaries and Christian liberal arts universities should take the time to read and integrate both books into courses. *From Bubble to Bridge*, with its case studies, is more of a textbook, and offers guides for use in the classroom. The importance of training Christian students and leaders in multifaith and interfaith relationships cannot be overstated in this current social and political climate. Although it is written for a predominantly North American audience, it makes room for international dialogue (although reaching beyond the borders of North America does not appear to have been the intent of any of the authors).

There is genuine concern from all the authors who have contributed to *From Bubble to Bridge* and *Teaching for a Multifaith World* that Christian scholars of all ages need to be literate in the religious climate of the world outside North America, and both these books have found ways to address, educate, and encourage their readers to do so.

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