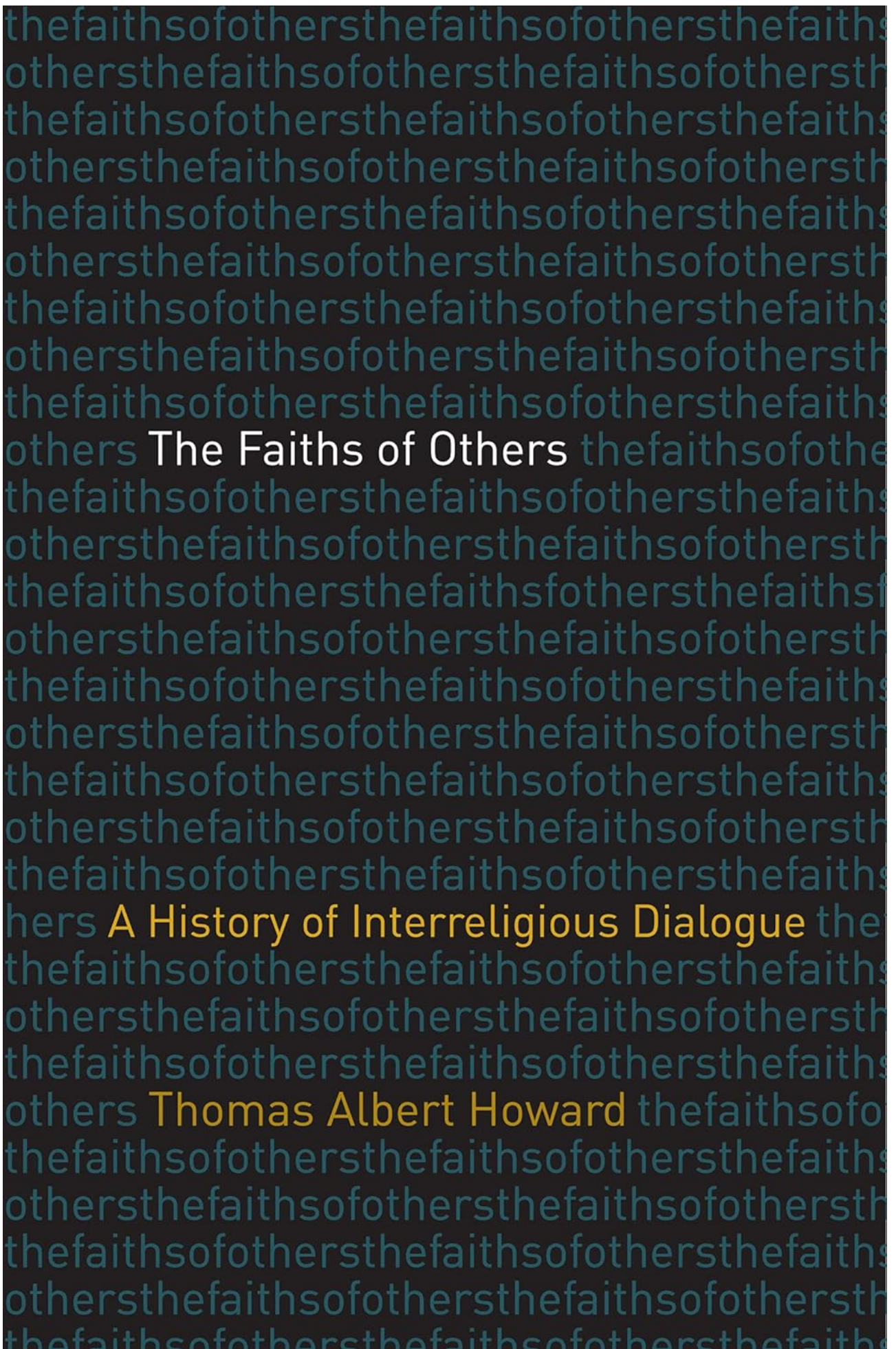




The Faiths of Others. A History of Interreligious Dialogue

01.06.2026 | Arie L. Molendijk

Thomas Albert Howard: The Faiths of Others. A History of Interreligious Dialogue. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2021 359 pp., £ 25,00/ \$ 38,-



The author of this book is clearly involved in its subject matter. The monograph opens with the statement that this project has taken him “to Sufi shrines in New Delhi, to the killing fields of Bosnia and Herzegovina, to ‘scriptural reasoning’ groups in Cairo, to the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Toronto (2018), and to archives and libraries in Rome, London, Chicago, and elsewhere. All of it has been a labor of love”. Thomas Albert Howard, who teaches at the Lutheran Valparaiso University (Indiana), dedicates the book to his students of the Jerusalem and Athens Forum at Gordon College, a nondenominational Christian college in New England. “The Jerusalem and Athens Forum strives to help students reflect on the relationship between faith and intellect, deepen their own sense of vocation, and awaken their capacities for intellectual and moral leadership.” (<https://www.gordon.edu/JAF>) Readers of this journal may be familiar with Howard’s monograph *Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern German University* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), which, curiously enough, has not been reviewed in these pages. The intention of this new book is not merely historical. Howard argues that a better historical understanding of “the discursive terrain and trajectories of interreligious dialogue” helps “us to become better citizens of the world” (15). This perspective is articulated at various places in the book. Knowledge of the past is in this view “an indispensable prerequisite for living well, wisely, and in service to things that truly matter” (28).

The book has its starting point in the observation that in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries many organizations for interreligious or interfaith dialogue have been established. Howard speaks of “a booming heyday for interreligious dialogue” (2) and is interested in how this phenomenon came about. The first chapter discusses several premodern forerunners of interreligious dialogue, prominent among them the Islamic emperor Akbar (1542–1605), who extended Mughal power over the greatest part of the Indian subcontinent and famously sponsored and organized debates between representatives from various faith traditions. The main three chapters, however, focus on three more recent meetings: Chicago’s World’s Parliament of Religions of 1893, London’s Conference on Some Living Religions in 1924, and Vatican II’s *Nostra aetate* (1965). This overview, which had to be selective, aims to prepare the discussion of some normative issues at stake in promoting religious dialogue as a force for good.

The World’s Parliament of Religions that was held in Chicago from 11–27 September 1893 is a much-studied subject, evaluated at the time by some as one of the greatest events in history, but also as a masterpiece of Satan. It is analysed by present-day scholars from various angles – as a landmark in American religious history, but also as a key element in a series of international interfaith meetings. The Parliament is seen as a contribution to the emerging science of religion, or – diametrically opposed to this view – as a blending of faith and scholarship. Yet it is probably wise to further qualify statements about what was achieved. Yes, there were contributions to scholarship, but Christian superiority claims were never far away. The organizers themselves were to some extent aware of the precarious relationship between Christianity and the other invited religions. They tried to avoid controversies by stipulating strict rules of conversation that forbade polemics against other positions.

Howard’s focus is, of course, on the aspect of religious dialogue. He does not want to apply “present-day moral” standards that would in his view lead to unfair criticism and seeks to understand the Parliament from the point of view of the organizers (80). On the basis of a gamut of sources and secondary literature, the author gives a fine overview of the preparations, meetings, speakers and themes that were discussed. Not only the contributions from the West, but also from representatives of Eastern religions are addressed. The most prominent orator was probably Swami Vivekananda, who propagated a reformed Hindu spirituality and founded the Ramakrishna Mission. Howard observes that Vivekananda “snatched inclusivist language and ‘fulfilment’ theology from American Protestants and applied it adroitly to his understanding of ‘Hinduism’” (117). This is a rather colloquial formulation (‘snatch’), which could have been easily avoided and may raise concerns with readers whose outlook is informed by Edward Said’s critique of orientalism. In this context Howard also writes: “Vivekananda’s fluent English, bright saffron

monastic garb, and yellow turban bedazzled the audience". The endnote that refers to the proceedings of the Chicago Parliament does not substantiate this statement. I did not read similar characterisations of Western participants.

The second interreligious meeting discussed in this book also took place in the context of a world fair, the British Empire Exhibition in London in 1924–1925. Although a less grand event than the Chicago world fair, an estimated 27 million people visited this exhibition. The concomitant Conference on Some Living Religions within the Empire stands out in the history of interfaith dialogue, as it led to the creation of the World Congress of Faiths in 1936, the oldest continuously existing organization in the field. The *Evening News* addressed the 1924 conference under the headline "Queer Religions of Empire", as the organizers did not include Christianity and Judaism, but wished to concentrate on the lesser-known religions. They invited people who could speak from a particular religious standpoint and, as in Chicago, they dispensed with discussion after each presentation (138 f.). Howard admits that "many telltale binaries of Orientalist discourse" (161), such as a modern, progressive "West" against an exotic and backward "East", were at work in the very structures of the meeting. Still Orientalism, "while illuminating in some respects, cannot serve as the exclusive hermeneutic for understanding the conference" (162). Apparently, it is not easy to balance this fundamentally critical Saidian perspective and the approach from within, which honours the point of view of the organizers.

The third main topic of the book is the coming about of the Vatican II document *Nostra aetate*, which was promulgated on 28 October 1965 by Pope Paul VI. Although originally meant to address the relationship with the Jews, the final "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" had a broader scope and exhorted the church's members to enter into "dialogue and collaboration" with members of other religious traditions in general, such as Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism (181). If one looks at the extremely difficult trajectory of the declaration, it is a small miracle that in the end an overwhelming majority of 2,221 bishops voted for it. In a pleasant and leisurely style, Howard describes the vicissitudes of the establishment of the document and its aftermath. He pays a lot of attention to John Paul II's high-profile initiative, the organization of the World Day of Prayer of Peace on 27 October 1986 in Assisi. In his closing speech the pope expressed his conviction "that in Jesus Christ, as Saviour of all, true peace is to be found" (229). A later document, *Dominus Iesus* (2000), again defended the "unicity and universality of the salvific mystery of Jesus Christ" (231). In this view dialogue certainly does not replace evangelization.

Howard values the Catholic "pivot to interreligious dialogue" at the Second Vatican Council as a catalyst for similar developments and suggests that the various interreligious initiatives around the world amount to a "movement", which is gathering pace in the twenty-first century. This may be true, but the events that are discussed in this book do not suggest much of a dialogue. In Chicago and London discussion was explicitly forbidden, and the open-mindedness of the Catholic Church at Vatican II is not the same as a conversation with representatives of other faiths. Even twenty years later in Assisi their role was rather limited. One could even claim that the representatives of other religions were to a great extent used to celebrate the superiority of the Catholic Church. That is not to say that new developments in interreligious understanding and dialogue are not to be welcomed, but personally I would not be too optimistic about what they may actually establish in our messy and conflicting present-day world.

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Source: Journal for the History of Modern Theology/Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologieggeschichte, 29/2, 2022, DOI <https://doi.org/10.1515/znth-2022-0024>.