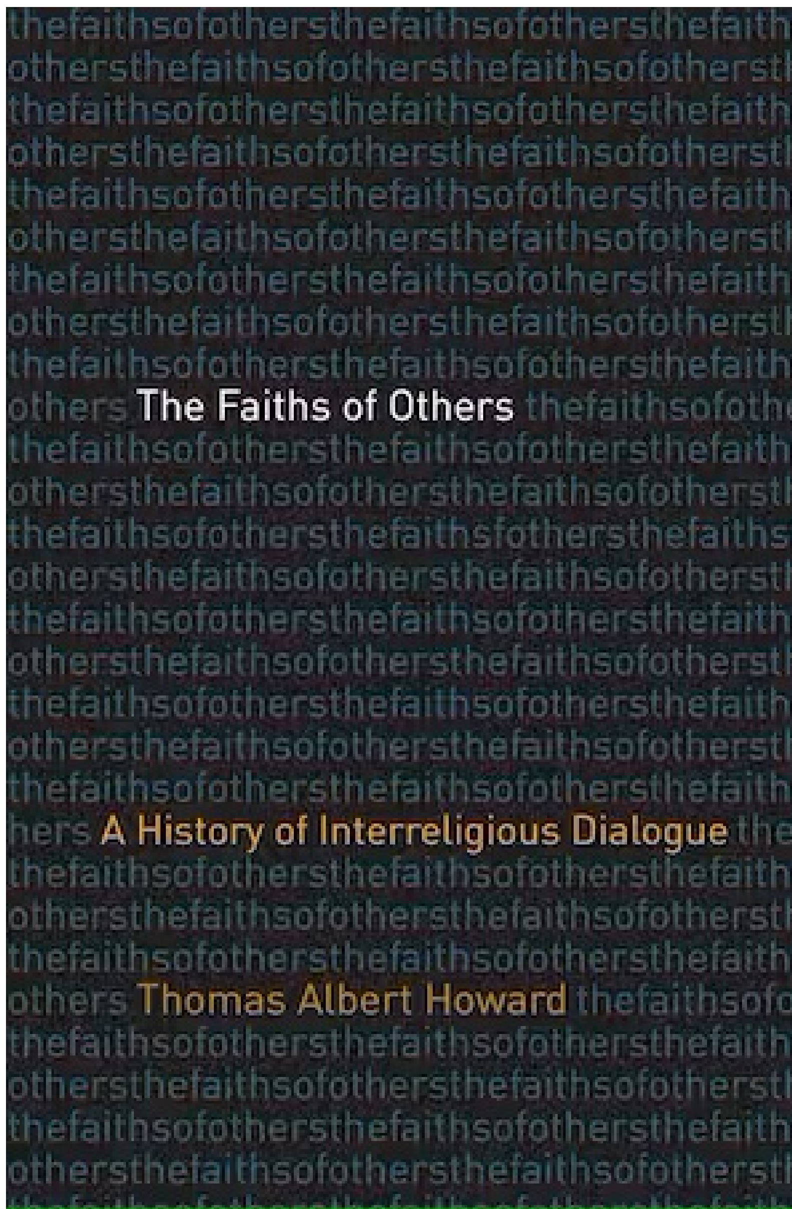
The Faiths of Others

01/10/2022 | Deborah Weissman

Thomas Albert Howard:

The Faiths of Others. A History of Interreligious Dialogue.

Yale University Press: 2021; 376 Pages; $38.00



When did the history of interreligious dialogue begin?

Some Bible readers might place it in Genesis 14: 18-19, with the encounter between Abram and Melchizedek; in Exodus with the discussions between Moses and his father-in-law, Jethro the Midianite; or in Malachi 3:16, “Then they who feared the Lord spoke with one another.” The Talmud, in several places—e.g., Mishnah Avodah Zarah 4:7—records conversations between rabbis

and Gentile leaders. These references all reflect a Western bias. What about that great incubator of faiths, the Indian subcontinent? Surely believers in the various Eastern traditions encountered one another frequently, perhaps even on a daily basis.

Interreligious encounters took place throughout prehistory and history, whenever human beings of different backgrounds, ethnicities, and languages met. But these encounters were sometimes violent or, at least, aggressive, with the goal of converting one side to the other's faith. Surely that is not a situation of true dialogue. Dialogue out of some sense of mutual curiosity and, at least, de facto acceptance of the Other seems to be a product of the Enlightenment. It is dependent on some sense of tolerance, if not always on the notion of plural truths.

Thomas A. Howard, in his important and carefully researched book *The Faiths of Others: A History of Interreligious Dialogue*, begins the story with what he terms premodern historical antecedents, the primary one being the court of India's great Mogul leader Akbar in the 16th century. Howard is acutely aware of the difficulty of applying categories across the board: not only "secular" and "religious," but also "public" and "private." He shows a deep consciousness of the danger of Orientalism. Even conceptualizing Hinduism as a religion is problematic, in just one example of how Westerners, especially Christians, have imposed their particular taxonomies on other systems.

From the 13th to the 15th centuries, some Christians and Jews in the West held disputations, which often had consequences in the real world, including physical attacks and expulsions. Certainly disputations are not dialogues, but they do highlight the fraught question of contextualizing dialogue within status and power relations, which has implications for our dialogues today. Christian-Jewish dialogue, for example, has a totally different character in Melbourne, Australia, for example, than it does on the West Bank between Israelis and Palestinians.

Still, in these radically different contexts, as Howard notes, "…regarding global peace as a major purpose of interfaith dialogue is practically axiomatic" (174). Yet, he also indicates that the "surprising irony" is that debates over the "permissibility and proper modality" of dialogue "have not infrequently been a source of internal rifts within both Christianity and other faith traditions" (27). One of the most useful aspects of the volume is its tracing of the development of the complex relationships between religions and empire. Knowledge of other faiths can be both an instrument of control and domination and part of the process of de-colonization. For Christians, the two movements of interreligious dialogue and Christian ecumenicism, though sometimes motivated by similar pluralistic tendencies, can be in tension with each other, in the "real world."

The historical narrative that Howard offers focuses on three gatherings, each ground-breaking in its own way: the Chicago World Parliament of Religions in 1893, which took place within the centennial Columbian exposition; the London Conference on Some Living Religions within the Empire, in 1924; and the Second Vatican Council in Rome, 1962-1965, which produced, among other documents, *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions. At the Chicago conference, in a time when women were still prevented from having the vote, no fewer than 23 women (22 of them Christian!) gave talks, many of them social activists and suffragettes. Concurrently, as well, a separate Congress of Women was held.

The London Conference excluded Christianity and Judaism "because of their presumed familiarity" (137-8). This is problematic on two levels, which the author does not note: (1) It assumes that exposure to religions other than one's own is necessarily about their exotic nature; and (2) Decades later, Abraham J. Heschel called Judaism "the least known religion."

The third example of a watershed event, the Second Vatican Conference, has been extensively written about, but Howard still brings in interesting new information about the crafting of *Nostra Aetate* (181-211.)

Copyright JCRelations

The final section of the book details Howard's conclusions, which cover developments up to 2020. Howard's perspective is critical and even skeptical, but he is nonetheless committed to expanding the purview of interreligious dialogue and study. He seems to be aware of one the book's major flaws, asking "how relevant are some interfaith events to the world's religious realities?" (248). The entire organizational structure of the book is a series of detailed descriptions of high-level, elitist gatherings in which the grassroots were largely ignored, women were peripherally involved, and sometimes certain faiths were excluded for a variety of reasons. Simply by asking whether such elite gatherings "exert any actual influence among the rank and file of various faiths," Howard himself perpetuates the overemphasis on elites (178). Howard doesn't explore the influence of dialogue on the educational preparation and formation of clergy, on profound changes in—to note a few examples—lectionaries and preaching, on the Oberammergau Passion Play, interfaith chaplaincies in public institutions, etc.

A more grassroots-oriented approach might have included the impressive story of the Sisters of Sion. The Sisters, at least in Jerusalem, often work with representatives of Eastern faiths. In 2017, the Israeli Foreign Ministry organized a conference in Jerusalem for Jews, together with Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, Confucians, Shintos, Taoists, and a Zoroastrian. Interreligious dialogue was recognized as a way of encouraging international recognition and cooperation, as well as efforts for peace.

Perhaps companion volumes should deal with the concomitant textual-canonical and theological elaborations of the theme. As a final note, I must express a reservation about Howard's seemingly unqualified support at the end of the volume for the movement called Scriptural Reasoning. In my experience, when interreligious study such as that found in this movement, involves looking for the lowest common denominator and ignoring historical and theological contexts, it would seem to be a case in which a person's "gain is cancelled by his loss," as the Mishnah puts it (Avot 5:11).

Deborah Weissman is past president and board consultant of the International Council of Christians and Jews.
Source: Reading Religion, August 3, 2022. Licensed for reuse under a Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.