

## Book Review:

*With the best of intentions: Interreligious missteps and mistakes.* Mosher, Lucinda, Elinor Pierce and Or N. Rose, eds. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2023.

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*Abstract: With the Best of Intentions: Interreligious Missteps and Mistakes presents a wealth of perspectives on the perils and promises of interfaith relationship building. Ranging from fundamental methodological insights to vulnerable retellings of personal mishaps, this volume aims to catalyze conversation by reframing interreligious errors as opportunities for growth and the creation of more resilient interfaith (and intrafaith) relationships, communities, and collaborations.*

*Keywords: interfaith literacy, interreligious, difference, identity, discomfort*

One could be forgiven for mistaking *With the Best of Intentions: Interreligious Missteps and Mistakes* for something it is not. This is not a guide to common interfaith mistakes. As contributor Jennifer Howe Peace intimates, the creation of such “a simple guide to interfaith or intrafaith engagement” would jeopardize the more urgent task of engaging with the “nuances of our relative positions as we sort through our relationships to one another and to our diverse philosophical and religious perspectives” (“Breaking Bread,” 130). Instead, this volume opts for something that is ultimately of greater worth: a wide-ranging selection of 41 voices that disagree, err, fail, flourish, and together forward a conversation worthy of continuing beyond the printed page.

The book follows a trajectory that many readers may recognize from their own interfaith journeys. Moving from the challenges of initial encounters to the vicissitudes of conversations shaped by values (often glaringly visible) and power (frequently invisible). Part I, “First Impressions,” begins with a reminder that sometimes our desire to embrace difference can lead to overthinking and mistaken presumptions about those we wish to welcome. This is followed by reflections on the multiple dimensions of meaning housed within our labels and the difficulties that are often implicit in attempts to name ourselves within a fraught landscape of proliferating, partial identities. While these authors take seriously the need to ask for permission and seek understanding, they also encourage us to consider when misunderstandings should be corrected, the best ways of doing so, and the necessity of creating spaces for groups and individuals to discern their own boundaries.

Part II, “Presumptions,” scrutinizes other essential questions, including—but not limited to—what role (if any) might prayer play in interfaith gatherings: how might we navigate boundaries obscured by everyday language and what should be done when parts of our interfaith paradigm exclude erstwhile allies? A common theme emerges; how can we learn to deal with difference

*differently*, and what languages, worldviews, and histories can or should inform that learning process? As Part III, “Conversations,” makes clear, taking that process seriously requires an interrogation of economic, racial, ethnic, cultural, and vocational presuppositions. Speaking as religious leaders, educators, and caregivers, these authors share moments of intense personal growth fueled by difficult and demanding interpersonal encounters that underscore the uncertainties of interfaith (and intrafaith) engagement. In so doing, they also remind us that, beyond creeds, practices, and traditions, the foundation of interfaith work is and must be relational.

This emphasis on the pitfalls and promise of interfaith relationship building decisively shapes the concluding sections of *With the Best of Intentions*. Part IV examines approaches to navigating between “Competing Values” with contributions that rethink appreciation (as opposed to syncretism and appropriation), extol the necessity of adaptability in interfaith dialogue, and elevate the civic dimension as a space of potential commonality. This culminates with consideration of boundary creation, how the visibility of those boundaries is conditioned by subjectivities, group affiliations and identity markers, and how traversing and trespassing them can be a profound source of growth and grace for others. This exploration of boundary maintenance sets the table for a deliberate reckoning with power, those who wield or lack it, and how its influence can both determine and overdetermine opportunities for interfaith collaboration. Part V, “Power Dynamics,” addresses this situation head-on through a powerful combination of anecdotes and analyses that lay bare forces and sources of invisibility, including brute paternalism and othering, normalized discrimination, and more subtle forms of aggression, displacement, and marginalization. While exposing the manifold impacts of power, the authors reveal openings for resistance within hegemonic structures. The work closes by sounding cautious notes of hope as the authors illuminate newly-emerging avenues for overcoming or circumventing some of the most common dead ends of interfaith relations.

Resonating with the words of contributor Jaxon Washburn, this rich resource enacts some of the greatest benefits of interfaith experiences by providing “invaluable tools with broad usefulness [relating] to communication, active listening, conflict resolution, peacemaking, and reciprocity” (“Coexistence Wasn’t Good Enough,” 143), all of which will be useful for chaplains, clerics and other religious leaders, educators, and activists in the burgeoning worlds of interfaith and intrafaith exploration. Replete with divergent perspectives, *With the Best of Intentions* shares both the strengths and weaknesses of any truly diverse conversation: some voices might clash with our sensibilities and expectations, just as others might lend language to what was previously an amorphous anxiety or unarticulated desire. Nevertheless, the voices gathered here are united in extending an invitation to continue contemplating, complicating, and contributing to the conversation convened therein.

After two decades teaching Spanish, literature, and philosophy in higher education, Rev. Dr. Chris Ray Alexander now serves as Chaplain & Chair of Religious Studies at Woodward Academy in Atlanta, Georgia. He is also an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ and Minister for Interfaith Engagement at First Congregational Church of Atlanta, UCC.