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Christians and Jews in Dialogue: Learning in the Presence of the Other

REVIEW

Mary C. Boys and Sara S. Lee

Christians and Jews in Dialogue: Learning in the Presence of the Other

(Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2006), 240 pp.

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Interreligious dialogue, especially between Christians and Jews, has been the focus of a great deal of attention in the last several decades. However, Mary Boys and Sara Lee, explore a different, more robust dimension of the encounter with the religious other which they call interreligious learning. The difference is more than semantic; this book reveals the sophisticated educational theory, planning, and implementation that is necessary to construct a transformative learning experience for people with deep roots in their faith tradition who seek to move beyond the comfort zone of their own religious communities. The two authors, one a Catholic nun and professor of religious education and the other a director of an important graduate program in Jewish education, share their personal and professional collaboration on five groundbreaking projects in which they develop new models of interreligious learning. I was a participant in two of these projects and can attest to the powerful educational experience that they created for Jewish and Christian religious educators and academics. Their new book provides an invaluable gateway into these cutting-edge educational experiments and an open window into the deep thought and personal narratives that brought them into being.

The book begins with a conceptual framework that sets a context and direction for Boys' and Lee's work in interreligious learning. A key element of their paradigm is the interdependent and dialectical relationship between religious pluralism and "textured particularism." Pluralism, from their perspective, requires the individual to extend beyond mere tolerance and strive to learn from the religious other. "Pluralism, in contrast, demands pursuing understanding; it is built upon an encounter of commitments and a respect for differences that flows from the knowledge of one's own tradition." (8) It is clear that the need for the particular is embedded in the very definition of pluralism. Similarly, by textured particularism they mean, "a keen sense of beliefs and practices in one's own religion as well as the finitude of that tradition." (9) The particularism is textured both because it is rooted in authentic commitment and because it acknowledges the human limitations that are inherent in any tradition. This symbiotic relationship between pluralism and particularism leads the authors to construct an unique pedagogical approach to interreligious learning.

The book oscillates between reflections on their experience developing educational models and personal stories of each woman's journey into the uncharted waters of interreligious learning. It is instructive to read about the ways in which their personal biographies and relationships shaped their interest in this field of inquiry. A chapter is devoted to a trip they took together to Auschwitz followed by a chapter that describes their travels together in Israel. They do not shy away from confronting some of the most challenging obstacles to mutual understanding. In both chapters the reader is drawn to the particular experiences they each had and the way those experiences were shaped by the presence of the other. Indeed, throughout the book we hear their individual voices both separately and in dialogue with each other alongside their combined voices as they describe the projects they worked on together. In this way the very structure of

the book models the movement between particularism and pluralism that is at the core of their educational vision.

One fundamental element of their educational orientation is the asymmetry they have discovered between Christians for whom theology is of urgent concern in the context of interreligious learning and Jews for whom history is the critical issue. Boys and Lee place great emphasis on this understanding, and they conclude that "addressing this asymmetry has become one of the cornerstones of our work together." (15) In the chapter on the educational theory that undergirds the projects they constructed, again we read, "one of the fundamental axioms of our Jewish-Christian work is that Jews don't so much have to change their theology as they do their self-understanding based on history." (97) I am not at all convinced that this assertion is true, and that there is not important work to be done in the realm of Jewish theology that should inform the pedagogy and content of interreligious learning. While it may accurately reflect the different proclivities of the authors, I would hesitate to apply this to Jews more generally. There is a long and important history of theological reflection on other religions by Jewish philosophers and theologians. Irving Greenberg, whose writings on religious pluralism and Christian-Jewish relations are cited in the book several times, formulates new and bold theological positions in response to contemporary Christianity. In addition, *Dabru Emet*, a Jewish statement on Christianity written by a group of highly regarded professors of Jewish Studies, is filled with theological claims that challenge Jews to reconceptualize their understanding of Christianity in terms of authentic Jewish religious principles, not just historical analysis. It is imperative, in my view, to reevaluate this apparent asymmetry, and to rethink the educational theory in light of a more nuanced understanding of the different agendas that emerge from each faith community.

The foundation upon which Boys and Lee build their pedagogy of interreligious learning is deeply rooted in constructivist educational theory. The writings of Lee Shulman, Nicholas Burbules, and Dwayne Heubner, among others, have been significant influences on the development of their educational models. Arguably, the most useful section of the book is the detailed articulation of the various components that comprise the pedagogic approach they constructed. The intense and deliberate planning, the focus on helping people "get inside" the religious tradition of the other, the commitment to creating a safe environment for learning, and the conviction that true study generates "conversations that open up new perspectives or draw participants more deeply into thought" (95) are the building blocks of a transformative educational experience. The voices of various participants quoted throughout the book witness to the profound learning that Boys and Lee have nurtured, and beckon all those who are passionate about religious pluralism to pour over this important book.