

Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations

Volume 2, Issue 2

2007

Article 15

FEATURE TOPICS:

THE CENTENARY OF ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL
60TH ANNIVERSARY OF SEELISBERG CONFERENCE

What Do We Want the Other to Teach About Us? Jewish, Christian and Muslim Dialogues

REVIEW

David L. Coppolla, ed.,

*What Do We Want the Other to Teach About Us?
Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Dialogues*

(Fairfield, CT: Sacred Heart University Press, 2006), xviii + 421 pp.

Reviewed by Eugene J. Fisher, Associate Director Emeritus,
Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

This very useful volume is the result of five international Christian, Jewish, Muslim conferences held from 2000 to 2003 in Jerusalem, Israel; Edmonton, Canada; Rome, Italy; Bamberg, Germany; and Fairfield, Connecticut. The contributors include religious leaders and scholars from the three communities deeply involved in interreligious dialogue, including representatives of the Holy See. The purpose of this significant enterprise was, as the editor notes in the preface (p. ix), to develop a resource that religious leaders in each of the Abraham traditions could use to discover how the other two would like to be presented in their textbooks and from their pulpits, to ensure accuracy and understanding. Too often in the past each of our traditions has tended to impose on the other two a definition of their beliefs and practices that is misleading and distorted. Today, Christians must allow Jews to define the true nature of Judaism and Muslims to tell us what Islam really teaches, etc.

The editor has written not only an introduction for the whole collection, but one for each of its parts, helpfully setting the stage for the contributions to follow and providing a context for them. He notes with refreshing honesty, for example, that “these papers are neither equal nor parallel,” (p. xvii), especially given the differing native languages and cultural backgrounds of the various participants which, in turn, influenced how they understood the topics they were asked to address.

Each section concludes with further discussion and study questions, and suggestions for possible action in the community. The book concludes with a well considered list of books for further reading and pertinent websites. The latter, however, is missing two of the more important websites in the field: www.bc.edu/cjlearning and www.ushmm.org (the website of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum), not to mention, if one wants to understand Catholic teaching, the websites of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (www.usccb.org) and that of the Holy See (www.vatican.va).

The twenty-seven essays are arranged into five parts, the first part being three essays on “Setting the Context for Dialogue,” by Remi Hoekman, OP, Tsvi Blanchard, and Michael Fitzgerald, MAfr. These establish, respectively, the sense of dialogue as “sacred space,” the moral imperative for Abrahamic dialogue, and the witness the three great, intertwined religions have, together, to offer to the world. Part II focuses on theology. Alon Goshen-Gottstein, David Burrell, CSC, and Jamal J. Elias, given the short space allocated to such a vast theme, more than adequately summarize the essentials of the three traditions that need to be conveyed if others are to understand their respective traditions.

Part III asks what we want the other to teach about our historical traditions. The ten essays, by Johannes Rau, Godehart Ruppert, Derek Penslar, Michael Dushinsky, David Fox Sandmel, Leonard Swidler, Hans-Joachim Sander, Christopher Heil, Wolfgang Kraus and Jamal Badawi do respond, collectively, to what they were asked to do, though I would have liked more on the Islamic historical tradition. I would also have liked to have seen some more direct confrontation between the scholar/participants on the serious misinformation we each convey about what the other has done to us over the centuries, and what we have done to them. It is not simply our own views of our own history, but our distortions of our mutual histories of conflict, persecution and tolerance, that need to be addressed today, and I believe with some urgency. But it may well be that the organizers of this remarkable series of conferences have already organized such a series of conferences, to which I look forward.

Part IV on prayer and liturgy includes essays by Reuven Kimelman, Tsvi Blanchard, Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, David Coppola and Margaret Palliser, OP, Abdul Hadi Palazzi, and Ali Hussen al-Badawi as-Siddiqi. This was a very satisfying section, leading to the last and also very enriching section on our ethical traditions. As with theology, prayer and liturgy, the ethical traditions of the Abrahamic faiths are very closely intertwined. And as with theology, prayer and liturgy, to understand the others' tradition is to be helped immensely to understand our own. Eugene Korn, Barry Friedman, John L. Elias, Brian Stiltner, and Asad Husain and Mohammad A. Siddiqi do excellent work in distilling the essence of their respective traditions. Again, as with the book as a whole, it is left up to the reader to parse out and analyze the commonalities and differences from his or her own religious perspective.

What this book gives, as have few if any before it, is a vast amount of straightforward and readable material, with each tradition speaking in its own name, for the scholar or educator to analyze and to sift through. It is a valuable resource and, I think, will be consulted many times in the years to come by those Christians, Muslims and Jews who want to teach their own communities or other communities about their faith, history, and religious life.

I would end with a personal note. I shared this volume with a colleague of mine at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Fr. Francis Tiso, who staffs the U.S. Bishops' ongoing dialogues with the Muslim community. It was used in a dialogue and both sides, Muslim and Christian, found it very helpful. So it has been "field-tested," and found to be quite valuable.