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Building the Interfaith Youth Movement: Beyond Dialogue to Action

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REVIEW

Eboo Patel and Patrice Brodeur, eds.

Building the Interfaith Youth Movement: Beyond Dialogue to Action

(Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 263 pp. + index

Reviewed by Mary C. Boys, Union Theological Seminary

“A quick read,” someone said about this book. Yes and no. Readers do not need to make their way through dense theories or technical language; clearly, the intended audience transcends the company of scholars. It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss the value of this volume. It not only offers considerable information about various interfaith youth movements in a variety of locations at various levels, but also some splendid reflections about interfaith engagement.

The editors have organized the twenty-four chapters, each relatively brief, into seven sections indicative of the range of the anthology. The initial section offers some theoretical discussion of the context of interfaith youth movement. Eboo Patel’s essay, “Affirming Identity, Achieving Pluralism” is especially strong, and establishes the framework for his later essay (jointly authored with Mariah Neuroth) on the Interfaith Youth Core. The essay on “Theologies of Interreligious Encounters and Their Relevance to Youth,” by J. Nathan Kline consists primarily of a superficial review of Paul Knitter’s highly nuanced *Introducing Theologies of Religion*. Among the chapters in the second section on international interfaith organizations is a fascinating chapter, “The Gujarat Young Adult Project of the International Association for Religious Freedom” by Zulfikhar Akram and Ramola Sundram. This essay documents the contribution interfaith engagements have made in a region of India where religious conflict has been endemic.

Sections three and four deal with interfaith work in the context of schooling, focusing on higher education and secondary education, respectively. The former includes analysis of the Seminarians Interacting program by Karen Wood, descriptions of interfaith in the life of Wellesely College by Victor H. Kazanjian, Jr., and the University of Illinois by five young leaders, and an insightful essay by Alison L. Boden on “Articulating What Is at Stake in Interreligious Work.” High school teachers, in particular, would learn from all of the essays on secondary education. Jane S. Rechtman’s article on “Teaching World Religions” seemed especially rich.

Sections five and six describe various projects, both community-based and immersion programs. All make for worthwhile reading, including the “Sacred Stories Project of the Ghetto Film School,” by Joe Hall and Andrew Unger. A final section by Paul Raushenbush analyzes the sorts of questions he fields as a contributing editor at Beliefnet.com in his advice column, “Ask Pastor Paul.”

A survey of the book as a whole is advisable. Not only do the essays read quickly, but the range of perspectives and projects is impressive. Yet musing on some of the central ideas and theoretical foundations will reveal the potential of this book; many essays bear re-reading. For example, readers might ask about the extent to which developmental psychology provides a valuable tool for evaluating interfaith youth movements. They might pursue the nine “integrated theories” Patel identifies as the basis of the Interfaith Youth Core (171-172). They might ask how religious institutions might instill a lively sense of religious identity in their adherents without disparaging the other. They might even ask about the likely impact of the collected “testimonies” in this volume on those who hold religious office: What if bishops, heads of presbyteries, etc. were to take this book seriously? Would it affect their priorities?

I often think of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’s sage – and sobering – judgment that the fate of the twenty-first century may turn on whether the world’s religions can “make a space for those who are not its adherents, who sing a different song, hear a different music, tell a different story” (*The Dignity of Difference: How To Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, 43). As one who shares this belief, I commend *Building the Interfaith Youth Movement* to a wide audience. It is a resource that should be taken seriously by religious leaders of every generation.