Daniel M. Cohn-Sherbok, George D. Chryssides and Usama Hasan

People of the Book: An Interfaith Dialogue about How Jews, Christians and Muslims Understand Their Sacred Scriptures

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In *People of the Book*, co-authors Dan Cohn-Sherbok (Jewish), George Chryssides (Christian) and Usama Hasan (Muslim) model an interfaith dialogue on the topic of their respective holy books: the Tanakh, the Christian Bible and the Qur'an. It is a noteworthy contribution to interreligious studies and interfaith relations on three counts. First, the book takes the form of a 'friendly, yet frank' conversation (18). From this follows the second point, that the book is decisively written in elevated but not overly technical language; as such, academese and scholarly jargon do not unnecessarily weigh the text down. Third, the book itself is a model of interfaith dialogue in textual form; even where the content is not new to readers, the book can still be used in a class about how interfaith dialogue might unfold.

The first part concerns questions about scriptures: how they came about; were revealed, transmitted and translated; became authoritative; were employed and deployed by each religious community; and have been read and interpreted across varying contexts. Here we encounter some of the frankness already referred to: when, for instance, the three men address the topic of legalism and its (alleged) influence on reading Jewish and Islamic scriptures (56–62). In this case, readers get a taste for how dialogue can be sharp and heated and need not always be irenic. Left unaddressed is how the Christian claim that Jews and Muslims are 'legalistic' might inadvertently reproduce some anti-Judaic, anti-Semitic and even Islamophobic tropes of the contemporary world. The Christian Bible – or at least Christian tradition – may well have been interpreted as 'codified law requiring meticulous interpretation' (*pace* Chryssides: 56) in, for example, the formation of canon law, scholastic theology and Christian fundamentalist movements of America.

The subsequent four parts are conversations about the *content* of scriptures: the nature of God, the guidance that they offer, social and political issues, and the hope that they impart for this life and the next. Readers get a taste for how sympathetic dialogue partners from three traditions nonetheless refuse to reduce their differences either to some sort of 'common ground' or to 'essential' sameness with 'formal' differences. The section on the nature of God

demonstrates this well with regard to the topic of the Trinity: Cohn-Sherbok and Hasan do not gloss over this doctrine easily, as if this fundamental teaching of Christianity is not at odds with the Jewish and Islamic traditions. However, readers also come to recognise the limits of dialogue over scripture alone. Two-millennia worth of theological tradition on the Trinity (and Judaism and Islam have their own rich and complex intellectual and spiritual traditions) point to so much more detailed discussion than is possible in such a volume.

Readers who are knowledgeable about one or more of these traditions may also note where the conversation could have gone further. For instance, in chapter 7 on God's presence, it is surprising to see Cohn-Sherbok and Hasan seemingly argue for a more immanent God than Chryssides; given the incarnation, there is a certain irony that the Christian interlocutor appears more restrictive of God's presence than the Jewish or Muslim dialogue partners. Cohn-Sherbok mentions the *shekhina*, a Hebrew word that designates 'the glory of God, which serves as an intermediary between God and human beings' (86) and Hasan connects it to the parallel Qur'anic concept, the *sakinah* (89), as well as the divine attributes and Sufi interpretations of God's presence. Chryssides, however, makes no reference to John 1.14 in which the Word-made-flesh 'dwells' among us: the original Greek for 'dwell' (*skēnoō*) is a loan word from the Hebrew *shekhina* itself. The dialogue could have gone in a whole different direction with this etymological connection.

Other parts arguably demonstrate the limits of this sort of dialogue, however beneficial an example it may be. For instance, chapter 15 is a well-conversed threefold scriptural interpretation regarding the use and abuse of wealth; the reader comes to greater understanding not only of how each scripture speaks of wealth, and in particular usury, but also of how each dialogue partner distinguishes their tradition from the others. However, the dialogue does not exceed the boundaries of the explicitly 'religious' or 'scriptural'. That is, very little of our modern context, namely the inequalities and injustice of late capitalism, is brought into the conversation. Only Hasan, at the end of one of his discourses, challenges the 'exploitative aspect of modern, usurious capitalism' (174–5). In fact, Hasan alone appears to be critical of neoliberal and even racial capitalism. The other interlocutors seem to ignore the systemic and structural issues that make wealth far more complicated than the statement, for example, that 'Christians may legitimately be wealthy, if they are fortunate enough and have acquired their wealth honestly, but our money should be used wisely, and for good purposes' (181). Indeed, very little wealth in today's context is acquired honestly (even if someone does not intend to be dishonest) and 'fortune' is in large part a matter of structural privilege and advantage over the marginalised. How can interfaith dialogue on wealth be honest while

ignoring so-called neocolonialism and even neo-feudalism in which the global North effectively exploits the global South for capital, and wealthy, predominantly white members of society exploit non-white members?

These criticisms are not directed at the book itself, but at the larger project of interfaith dialogue that fails to take into account the complexities not only of any given religious tradition but also of our modern world. Interfaith dialogue must address not merely religious differences, but also differences of gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, dis/ability and class. This book could be used for students who seek to interrogate the merits and demerits of such a genre of dialogue.

Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ Axel Takacs

Hallvard Hagelia and Markus P. Zehnder, eds.

Interreligious Relations: Biblical Perspectives: Proceedings from the Second Norwegian Summer Academy of Biblical Studies (NSABS), Ansgar University College, Kristiansand, Norway, August 2015

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Following the murder of 77 young people by a fanatically anti-Islamic terrorist on the island of Utøya in 2011, the Norwegian Academy of Biblical Studies resolved that the theme of its first Summer Academy, in 2012, should be *Encountering Violence in the Bible* (papers published under that title by Sheffield Phoenix Press in 2013); it must have then seemed a natural progression for the second gathering, in 2015, to be on 'interreligious relations'. This volume gathers papers from the 2015 meeting; given the enormous breadth of potential subject matter involved, it is not surprising that the contributions vary considerably in their presuppositions, methods and content. That the editors remark that 'it will be for the reader to decide which of the views represented in this volume seem to be most convincing – and worth elaborating – in his or her eyes' (xvii) seems a fairly clear signal that they themselves recognise that there is also considerable variability in quality in these pieces.

The majority of the essays here are more or less detailed studies of what might be described as attitudes to or practice of 'interreligious relations' in the differing contexts of the Old and New Testaments. Most of the contributors